

Tough times leave employers on edge about Workplace Violence

By Steve Adams

[GateHouse News Service](#)

Posted Feb 02, 2010 @ 01:39 PM

Economic woes have recently raised the threat levels of deadly workplace violence despite employers' efforts to adopt early warning systems. Workplace killings have declined in recent years, according to federal government data, and many large companies have adopted extensive programs to identify employee threats. But recent high-profile incidents underscore the lingering threat of deadly workplace incidents, some of which are triggered by financial pressures.

"As people get more stressed, they start thinking about their survival skills and don't take a look at how their behavior is affecting their co-workers," said Mark Lies, who is a partner with the law firm Seyfarth Shaw in Chicago and a specialist in workplace violence issues.

Most recently, a dissatisfied employee opened fire at a St. Louis power equipment company on Jan. 7, killing three co-workers and injuring five others before taking his own life. The gunman was a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the company's pension plan.

Massachusetts' deadliest workplace attack occurred in 2000, when Michael McDermott shot to death seven co-workers at Edgewater Technology in Wakefield on the day after Christmas. In online posts, McDermott said employees were stressed about layoffs and threatened to bring a gun to work if his own job was eliminated.

With U.S. unemployment levels just short of 26-year highs, calls to employee assistance hotlines reflect a workforce on edge.

"With the layoffs and the general financial picture, we're getting a lot of reaction to that with people with a high degree of stress," said Rick Kronberg, director of clinical services for Perspectives Ltd. of Chicago. The company operates an employee assistance hotline for 275 large employers and institutions.

Violent workplace incidents rarely are random and can be years in the making, experts say. But co-workers and supervisors can miss telltale signs of instability, or can be reluctant to take action.

"Many times, it's a reporting problem," said Tim Horner, a managing director for security consultancy Kroll Inc. "There are signs out there that something's going on. It's not usual that somebody snaps."

Traditionally, employers have been advised to keep an eye on employees' verbal, physical or written behavior for clues that they may pose a threat of physical harm. More recently, employers are encouraged to monitor examples of bullying and intimidation, which can have disruptive consequences and expose companies to liability.

Lies, the attorney at Seyforth Shaw, said he advises clients to adopt anti-bullying policies. "It can mean verbal demeaning in meetings in front of others, e-mails that are hypercritical of someone else, or shunning people from meetings and not keeping them in the loop," he said.

The targets of workplace bullying can be most likely to lash out violently, Lies said.

"Human beings put up with a lot of harassment or threats until they snap," he said. "Then they either react violently or quit and file an employment case against the company."

Most large employers have a written workplace violence policy that explains how threats should be reported and handled. Typically a team of employees including security, human resources and mental health staff assess the potential threat, Lies said. Employees can be ordered to attend counselling or be terminated.

Part of the responsibility in preventing violent outbreaks rests with management. Many supervisors have good technical skills but fall short when communicating with staff.

"They're reluctant to address problems until they get to a more critical level," Kronberg said.

Businesses can reduce risks by screening applicants more selectively, in order to weed out risks.

Employee background checks are governed by the Fair Credit Reporting Act, and job applicants must sign a release granting permission for an employer to check their criminal histories.

Laws governing what criminal activity can be considered a factor and how many years back companies can check vary from state to state. Companies can require pre-hiring testing for illegal drugs, but they need applicants' permission to test for alcohol.

Poor screening and inadequate violence prevention programs are most common at smaller companies without extensive human resource departments, Lies said.

Consultants such as Employee Screen IQ of Cleveland help companies verify applicants' employment background and criminal histories, and they can research previous addresses through Social Security number traces.

“You never want to trust the applicant to tell you all the places they’ve lived,” EmployeeScreenIQ spokesman Nick Fishman said. “If they committed a crime, they’re going to leave that out.”

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WAYS TO PREVENT WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

- Limit the number of entrances and exits where non-employees can gain access to the office.
- Install devices that can make the office more secure, such as closed-circuit cameras, alarms, two-way mirrors, key-card access systems and panic-bar doors locked from the outside only.
- Use security guards or receptionists to control access to work areas.
- Implement policies for reporting threats in the workplace and for defusing potentially violent situations.
- Train employees about nonviolent ways to resolve conflicts.
- Implement secure cash-handling procedures in retail shops, such as using locked drop safes, carrying small amounts of cash and posting notices saying that limited cash is on hand.
- Make high-risk areas visible to more people, including the installation of good external lighting.

- Make employees aware of your zero-tolerance policy on workplace bullying, harassment and violence.

Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health