

safety bulletin

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While some professions are at higher risk than others, workplace violence can happen anywhere. Defined by the National Institute of Occupation Safety & Health (NIOSH) as “violent acts (including physical assaults and threats of assaults) directed toward persons at work or on duty,” workplace violence can come in many forms. It’s important to understand the warning signs of workplace violence and provide practice staff with information and training to keep themselves, your clients, and the practice safe.

If you’re thinking, “This topic doesn’t apply to me; I’ll never see any violence at my veterinary practice,” think again. While it’s true that acts of violence at veterinary practices have been uncommon historically, incidents of veterinarians receiving threats have been on the rise. Many employees are surprised to learn that workplace violence doesn’t need to involve physical violence or weapons. In fact, many people in client-facing jobs have experienced workplace violence without even knowing that the interaction could be labeled as such.

1 in 20

veterinary practices have experienced an act of violence against someone at the practice.



57%

Only 57% of practices surveyed have a written policy for managing situations that involve an act of violence.



55%

Only 55% of practices provide staff training on facility safety or awareness.

Workplace Violence at the Veterinary Clinic

Parvo Diagnosis Leads to Death Threats

Dr. A performed an uneventful exam on a puppy. Shortly after, the puppy developed signs of illness and was taken to another clinic, where it was diagnosed with parvo. Furious, the owner concluded that the puppy contracted parvo at Dr. A's clinic and began calling the practice several times a day. During the calls, the owner made threats against Dr. A's life, harassed practice staff, and threatened to have the practice shut down. The calls continued for several days, at which point Dr. A involved the police.

Client Becomes Aggressive with Practice Staff

While working at an emergency clinic, Dr. B performed surgery to remove a string foreign body in a cat. The cat presented in critical condition, with a septic abdomen, and died in recovery. Despite advising the owner before surgery that the cat may not survive, the owner became very upset, screaming threats in the lobby and displaying aggression toward the practice manager and other staff. Upon leaving, the client threatened to ruin the practice and began bombarding the clinic with negative social media reviews, all of which referenced a skewed version of events.

Workplace Violence Training Protocols

While it's impossible to control the actions of upset or angry clients like the ones in the scenarios above, providing staff with workplace violence protocols and equipping them to respond can go a long way in diffusing the situation and keeping practice employees and other clients safe.

Understanding the 4 Types of Workplace Violence

Violent incidents can be categorized into four types, all featuring different motives, victims, and



perpetrators. By developing an understanding of the various forms that workplace violence can take, employees can learn to recognize the warning signs early.

- ▶ **Type I: Criminal Intent:** The perpetrator has no legitimate business relationship to the workplace and enters the affected workplace to commit a robbery or other criminal act.
- ▶ **Type II: Customer/Client Violence:** The perpetrator is either the recipient or the object of a service provided by the affected workplace or victim. The assailant may be a current or former client.
- ▶ **Type III: Worker-on-Worker:** The perpetrator has some employment-related involvement with the affected workplace. Usually, this type of incident involves an assault by a current or former employee, supervisor, or manager.
- ▶ **Type IV: Personal Relationship Violence:** The perpetrator is someone who does not work there but has or is known to have had a personal relationship with an employee.

Laying the Groundwork for a Violence-Free Veterinary Practice

Creating a violence-free practice starts with a zero-tolerance policy toward any form of workplace violence—including verbal abuse, hostility, and harassment—by practice employees, clients, and



even vendors. It also is crucial to establish a practice “code of conduct” and ensure that all employees are familiar with it. Additionally, employees should be aware that all incidents of workplace violence—no matter the source—will be investigated and remedied as quickly as possible. On top of creating a code of conduct and assuring employees that violent incidents will be dealt with swiftly and firmly, it is advisable to take the following actions:

- ▶ Provide safety education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable—and what to do if unacceptable conduct occurs; identify training for employees to recognize, avoid, or de-escalate potentially violent situations.
- ▶ Encourage employees to alert their supervisor about any concerns about safety or security, and to report all incidents immediately.
- ▶ Secure the workplace with tools such as video surveillance, extra lighting, and alarm systems (where appropriate).
- ▶ Contact local law enforcement immediately if anyone in the practice exhibits signs of aggression or violence or experiences them.
- ▶ Institute a process to “escalate” an issue; for example, establish a code-word employees can discretely use to alert each other that they need help.
- ▶ Survey employees annually to determine whether they have felt threatened or if they have experienced concerns.

What happens in the wake of a workplace violence incident?

It can be difficult to get back to work after a violent or unsettling incident has occurred. Taking the right actions after an event can help minimize the effects of the incident, and practice owners (in consultation with the practice’s legal counsel, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and local law enforcement) should consider taking the following actions to help the practice team get back on track:

Understand the impact. A violent incident within the workplace affects everyone, including bystanders. Common immediate responses include shock and

Recognizing the Warning Signs

Being able to recognize the behaviors that often precede violent incidents can give practice staff a better chance at diffusing adverse situations. Some warning signs of workplace violence include rapidly changing behavior patterns (such as agitated movements, manner of speech, sudden shifts in mood), personal space violations, changes in voice or tone, or aggressive physical tells such as a clenched jaw or fists.

It is important to note that de-escalating a violent encounter is not the same as self-defense. Instead of being combative or defensive, de-escalation involves maintaining a safe distance; remaining as calm as possible; using a relaxed, steady tone and volume when speaking; and maintaining non-threatening body language.

disbelief; and long-term responses can include loss of security, anger, and social withdrawal.

Help employees process the event. Each employee will react differently to workplace violence incidents, but it’s important that all employees are given the opportunity to fully process the event.

Communicate with employees. Practice leadership should proactively communicate the steps they are taking to manage the situation and prevent future events from occurring.

Conduct a thorough policy review. Practice leadership should review the current workplace violence policy and address deficiencies. Changes should be made and implemented as necessary to prevent future incidents from occurring.

Violence in the workplace can have a significant and lingering effect on a practice. By training staff ahead of time how to stay safe and dealing with such events using the protocols outlined above, your practice can work to minimize the impact of workplace violence and ensure that your staff recovers as quickly as possible.

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