



Workplace Violence Prevention Best Practices

Workplace violence against mental health providers happens daily all over the country. It happens in many different forms; verbal, assault, battery, stalking, and sexual assault. There are, however, preventative procedures and behaviors that can help reduce these occurrences. It all starts by instilling situational awareness within our employees. Being present in the moment and paying attention to our surroundings help us anticipate a violent act and respond accordingly. Additionally, Centers can develop written policies related to workplace violence prevention. In this article, we will discuss best practices in lobby management, office setup, and home visits to help your employees reduce the likelihood of being caught in the middle of a violent act.

Lobby Management

The lobby can be a hotbed for violent behavior. Often, the environment in the lobby contributes to the escalation of such behavior. For this reason, lobbies need special and consistent attention, especially when wait times are long and the facilities are crowded. Some Centers utilize a security service while others have contracted local law enforcement to monitor their lobbies. However you choose to secure the lobby, you will need your mental health staff to periodically monitor it to identify any developing aggressive behavior.

1. Require security to continually monitor
 - a. Easier to accomplish with law enforcement
 - b. No cell phone use or web surfing on PCs
 - c. Periodically check blind areas and bathroom entries



Wall blocking view of women's restroom door entrance

- d. Poor security lets violence in the door
2. Have case coordinators assess the lobby every 15 minutes
 - a. Watch for visitors who appear to be withdrawn or anxious
 - b. Separate individuals who are causing a scene by de-escalating in a private setting
3. Use peer "ambassadors"
 - a. Consumers who have been treated and are trusted by Center staff can help identify individuals who need assistance or de-escalation

4. Provide your first point of contact with a barrier
 - a. We understand the desire to have the Center feel open and welcoming, but first points of contact are the most vulnerable to aggressive behavior, if not protected.



Protective glass barrier for first point of contact

5. At no time should consumers and/or visitors be allowed to walk through the halls unaccompanied.
 - a. Restrict access to secure locations with door locks or keycard/fob access
 - b. Watch for and restrict “piggybacking” where one person closely follows another while the first person is using their access card, key, or fob.

Office Setup

Office layout is a critical component to the prevention of workplace violence. If the layout is wrong, the employee can be trapped in the office. To reduce the likelihood of an entrapment that could lead to assault, it is recommended that staff have the quickest access to the door. Setting up your office this way may require some creativity, but it can be accomplished. As a best practice, employees should only have to take a step or two to reach the door and escape safely.



Incorrect office layout



Correct office layout

Home Visits

Most home visits, or any visit away from the office, are conducted in unfamiliar surroundings. This already puts our employees at a disadvantage. If you mix in unexpected visitors, aggressive pets, a dangerous neighborhood, drugs/weapons, and many other variables, our employees could find themselves in a situation they cannot get out of. Therefore, it is vitally important that employees communicate with co-workers and prepare themselves before the visit ever takes place.

1. Communicate with your co-workers
 - a. Someone within the department may have worked with the consumer before
 - b. Ask questions related to safety regarding the consumer and the location of the visit
 - c. Leave safety related notes in the consumer's file
 - i. The current case coordinator may not be the only one who works with the consumer
2. Know who and where you are visiting
 - a. Review the consumer's file
 - i. It is important to know if the consumer has a history of violence
 1. Past violence is a key indicator of future violence
 - b. Look up the address through Google maps
 - i. What is the best way into and out of the neighborhood?
 1. When you park, make sure your car is facing the direction you want to go when you leave
 - ii. Use Google's Street View or another satellite resource
 1. What do you see on the streets?
 - a. Abandoned cars
 - b. Stray dogs
 - c. Security bars on doors and windows
 - iii. Plan visits in dangerous neighborhoods during the early morning daylight hours
3. Set the appointment
 - a. Call the consumer
 - i. Set the expectations of the visit for the consumer
 1. Let them know what will be discussed and how long the session will last
 - a. Uncomfortable topics have resulted in case coordinators being assaulted
 - ii. Ask if anyone else will be present during the visit
 - iii. Ask if any pets will be in the home
 1. Ask them to separate them before your arrival
 - iv. If any part of the call makes you feel uneasy, change the location to a public setting or the office
 1. Park
 2. Library
 3. Fast food restaurant

4. Arrival at the home
 - a. Park the car in the direction you want to drive when you leave
 - b. Delay exiting the vehicle to see if dogs approach
 - c. Pay attention to where you step
 - i. Trip hazards are a frequent accident type even for home visits
 - ii. Watch for
 1. Cracked sidewalk
 2. Changes in elevation
 3. Rotted wood on steps or porch
5. At the door
 - a. Knock or ring the doorbell then take a few steps back away from the door
 - i. This gives you the ability to leave quickly, if needed
 - b. If at any moment your gut gives you an uneasy feeling, trust it!
 - i. Conduct the session outside, if able
 - ii. Politely give a reason why you need to leave
 1. Have a "go-to excuse" ready at any moment
 - a. "My boss just sent an alert that we have an emergency meeting at the office. I will have to call you back and reschedule."
 2. Do not wait once you are in your car
 - a. Leave immediately
6. Inside the home
 - a. Wait at the door and let your eyes adjust to the change in lighting
 - b. Always keep yourself closest to the door
 - i. Do not let anyone block your ability to exit
 - c. If at any moment your gut gives you an uneasy feeling, trust it!
 - i. Give a reason to exit the residence
 1. "I forgot the cord that connects my phone and laptop"
 2. "I forgot my pen" or "My pen just ran out of ink. I need to go get another one"
 - d. Keep your visit aligned with what was discussed on the phone (discussion topics and time)
 - i. Watch for signs of anxiety or agitation in the consumer or anyone else in the home
 1. If signs are displayed
 - a. Try to deescalate
 - b. If you cannot deescalate, calmly end the visit
7. Leaving the visit
 - a. Drive away immediately
 - i. Do not sit outside the consumer's home to jot down some last-minute notes
 - ii. Drive to a nearby store, park or church parking lot, if you need to write anything down or make phone calls
 - b. Keep notes of any safety concerns
 - i. Imperative for your review before the next visit with the consumer
 - ii. Imperative for future visits by a new case coordinator

Workplace Violence is an unfortunate facet of most occupations and it is difficult to completely prevent. We can, however, use the best practice tools discussed here to

reduce the likelihood of a violent act. Start by assessing your facilities for hazard exposures. Then, provide training and resources to your employees. Through drills and training, Center employees can equip themselves with the tools to keep themselves safe during an act of violence.

The contents of this article covered the high points of our various workplace violence trainings (Active Shooter Survival training, Remote Site Safety training for Case Coordinators and General Office Safety). However, it does not have the advantage of more detailed discussions we would normally have in our class. Please contact your TCRMF Risk Control Consultants for more information or to schedule a training for your staff.