

RESPONDING to WORKPLACE VIOLENCE *Before, During and After*

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1M people will experience workplace violence in the next 30 days

Every day in the news there appears to be at least one story about a violent public attack where people are either threatened, harmed or killed in the United States. Many of these occur in a workplace environment. This means there are likely to be employees who are somehow involved with this type of event. They may be the victims, the heroes, and in some unfortunate situations, they may be the perpetrators of the attack.

How do we find ourselves at this point in American society? The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recently released a report, discussing the development of workplace violence. In the report they discuss the day in August, 1986 when Patrick H. Sherrill walked into the Edmond, OK post office, where he was employed part-time, and shot 14 people to death before killing himself. The media coverage of the shocking events in Edmond led to greater public awareness of this kind of incident and ultimately became associated with the phrase “workplace violence.”

Over the past three years alone, four postal employees were killed by present or former coworkers in separate shootings in Johnston, South Carolina; Anniston, Alabama; and Atlanta, Georgia. Shootings in the workplace by unstable employees have become media-intensive events.

How big is this problem? Both the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have suggested that all businesses, no matter the size, develop a safety program to address potential violence that may occur in the workplace. Here are just a few statistics:

- ▶ **2 million. That's the number of American workers who will experience at least one incident of workplace violence in the next 2 months.**
- ▶ **80% of the workplace violence deaths that occur are caused by offenders using guns.**
- ▶ **28% of the incidents of workplace violence that happen to women come from a relative or direct personal acquaintance.**

- Nearly half of all workplace violence incidents happen in public settings.
- In the private sector, 88% of the most violent incidents in the workplace occur in service-related fields.
- The percentage of work-related shootings that happen in the private sector: 86%.

The funeral industry is not immune from such violent events. How have you as an employer/manager of funeral service staff prepared your employees for such an occurrence? Here are some considerations:

Funeral service owners and managers should consider that the perpetrators of workplace violence in the funeral industry are likely to fall into one of four categories:

- 1 Criminal intent.** The perpetrator has no legitimate current or previous relationship to the funeral service business or its employees and is usually committing a crime in conjunction with the violence. The act of committing robbery, shoplifting, trespassing and terrorism could be examples of this category.
- 2 Families served (past or present)/Vendors.** The perpetrator has a legitimate relationship with the funeral service business and becomes violent while being served by the funeral home. This category includes immediate or extended family members of the deceased, friends of the deceased, community members attending funeral services, and vendors who provide services or products.
- 3 Worker-on-worker.** The perpetrator is an employee or past employee of the funeral home who attacks or threatens another employee(s) or past employee(s) in the workplace.
- 4 Personal relationship.** The perpetrator usually does not have a relationship with the funeral service business but has a personal relationship with the intended victim.

No matter who initiates the confrontation, the deadliest situations involve an active shooter. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines active shooter as someone "actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area." A lot can happen in the chaotic minutes before police arrive; DHS advises staying calm and exercising one of three options: Run, hide or fight.

RUN: If there is an accessible escape route, leave your belongings and get out.

HIDE: If evacuation is not possible, find a hiding place where you won't be trapped should the shooter find you, lock and blockade the door, and silence your phone.

FIGHT: As a last resort and only when your life is in imminent danger, attempt to incapacitate the shooter by throwing items, improvising weapons and yelling.

Every Funeral Service Business Needs to Address Workplace Violence

Funeral service owners and managers at every workplace should develop a policy on violence that includes:

- Staff training
- Creating an emergency action plan
- Conducting mock training exercises with local law enforcement
- Adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence



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Know the Warning Signs

Some people commit violence because of revenge, robbery or ideology – with or without a component of mental illness. While there is no way to predict an attack, you can be aware of behaviors in employees or coworkers that might signal future violence:

- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Unexplained absenteeism, change in behavior or decline in job performance
- Depression, withdrawal or suicidal comments
- Resistance to changes at work or persistent complaining about unfair treatment
- Violation of company policies
- Emotional responses to criticism, mood swings
- Paranoia

Whether you are an owner/manager or an employee, it's important to be alert. Should these warning signs appear, early intervention may defuse the situation and prevent its escalation.

Funeral service owners/managers must be willing to act when necessary by setting boundaries and addressing employees directly when their behavior is unacceptable. A review process with progressive disciplinary action and timely follow up is an appropriate methodology to prevent further escalation of unacceptable behavior.

What preventative steps can be taken? Besides having a safety plan to follow and a process for addressing warning signs, are there preventative steps funeral service employers can take? Yes! Consider the following:

Work environment - Maintain an atmosphere in the workplace which encourages open communication between employers/managers and employees to create a positive, healthy and comfortable environment, and establish a pathway for an expression of concerns or complaints when they arise. Consider offering opportunities for professional development

and “quality of life” events to increase job satisfaction. It is also critical that consistent and unbiased discipline be applied when any employees exhibit improper conduct or poor performance. When employees understand that they will be held accountable, their behavior will hopefully become more dependable.

Security – Evaluate what type of security is appropriate for your facility to protect your employees and the assets of the funeral business given your community, location and availability of local police. Do you need an alarm system? What about cameras on the exterior of the building and in the public areas of the interior? Do you need on-site guard services at certain times? Do you have good lighting around your funeral building and parking lot? Is “911” set to speed dial on every office phone extension?

Education – Make sure that employees know the safety plan. Periodically run through a “mock” violent event. Do the employees know how they are to assist families should a violent event occur? Where in your facility are they to take shelter? Based on where the violent event occurs, how do they exit the building?

There is no perfect solution for preventing or addressing a potentially violent event. All a funeral service owner/manager can do is provide their employees some idea on how they can deal with such a situation should it occur and maintain the safest work environment possible. If you have questions or need assistance developing a safety plan or creating prevention policies, we stand ready to assist you. ♦

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