

Occupational violence

This information sheet provides advice for organisations where jobs that require face-to-face contact place workers at risk of exposure to occupational violence.

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Background

Occupational violence is any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This definition covers a broad range of behaviours that can create a risk to the health and safety of workers.

In the community services sector, other terms may be used for behaviour that fits this definition (eg acting out, challenging behaviour and behaviours of concern).

Whether it is intended or not, occupational violence is a workplace hazard.

OHS laws require employers to ensure risks to health and safety are eliminated or reduced so far as is reasonably practicable.

What to look out for

The nature and location of work, types of clients, staffing levels and skill mix can all affect the level of risk of exposure to occupational violence.

Risks of injury due to occupational violence can occur in community service settings where workers interact with other people (eg clients, families and members of the public).

The common sources of risk include situations where:

- individuals are bored, frustrated, anxious, disinterested or are under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- the physical environment creates a potential for harm (eg workplace is poorly maintained or unsecured or there is no access to safe areas)
- information about individuals' needs and behaviour is not known or available to workers
- new clients or individuals are introduced into the environment
- causes of behaviour are not well understood (eg triggers for behaviours of concern)
- communicating with clients is difficult or ineffective (eg clients cannot communicate their feelings or the source of discomfort, distress, illness)
- workers are assigned without adequate support (eg staffing, supervision, monitoring, information, resources)
- work is undertaken with clients in a range of environments (eg home visits, transporting clients, recreational activities)
- workers are by themselves or isolated
- the way services are delivered contributes to client frustration (eg long waiting times, refusing services, uncomfortable, overcrowded or noisy environments)
- services and clients are not matched
- services operate at night

- unknown people are present in the workplace or where work is done.

What should employers do?

Prevention and management of occupational violence requires an integrated organisational approach that uses some or all of the following safety measures.

Consultation

Consultation is essential to prevent occupational violence.

Employers must consult with health and safety representatives (HSRs) and workers, so far as is reasonably practicable. Consultation must occur when an employer:

- identifies or assesses occupational violence risks
- makes decisions about ways to address occupational violence risks
- makes decisions about providing information and training on prevention and management of aggression
- plans to change the way work is done.

Work environment

- Ensure physical layout of work areas are designed to reduce risks.
- Provide secure areas that are readily accessible for workers.
- Ensure work areas, access, egress and related areas are clearly lit.
- Provide a calm environment (eg noise levels, colour schemes and temperature).
- Keep work areas maintained, clean and tidy.
- Where services are provided in external locations, gather and provide information to identify risks and implement risk controls (eg where working at night, in high crime areas or in confined spaces such as vehicles). Where no information is available in relation to external locations, assume a high level of risk.

Systems

- Have a system for each client that includes:
 - full, accurate and up-to-date information about clients and care needs
 - been developed in consultation with family, friends, relevant professionals and other interested people who can provide relevant information
 - ways to transfer information about clients (eg when they are placed in or exit a service, attend day programs).

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- Have a system for assessment and screening of clients (eg client assessment is done by a suitably qualified person and includes an assessment of occupational violence risks).
- Develop, implement, monitor and regularly review client support strategies.
- Implement policies that cover the behaviour of visitors to the workplace (eg client's friends and family members, members of the public), including consequences for inappropriate behaviour.
- Eliminate or limit access to objects or areas that could be used to harm workers and/or other clients.
- Provide information and training on:
 - risk factors associated with occupational violence
 - measures in place at the workplace to control risk
 - workplace policy and procedures, including emergency and post incident responses, and off-site visits
 - communication strategies and skills
 - positive interventions.
- Seek information from workers to check whether their work environment, tasks or the client's needs have changed, or need to change.

Workers and staffing

- Provide appropriate supervision and support to workers.
- Provide induction training for workers.
- Ensure adequate and suitable staffing (eg ensure workers are matched to care and support needs and client mix, ensure adequate numbers of workers).
- Ensure all staff apply client support strategies consistently (eg use behaviour management strategies in the same way and have routines for clients).
- Provide communication equipment to workers that is tested and maintained (eg duress alarms).

Responding to incidents

Employers should ensure appropriate response measures are in place where there are risks of occupational violence. Workers should be trained on emergency and post-incident responses, including what to do during an incident. Workplaces should conduct regular drills to test response systems.

Response actions help reduce the harm caused to a worker and assist in preventing future incidents.

Responses will vary depending on the scale and severity of the incident. Steps taken should include:

- ensure staff and client safety, and provide first aid and/or medical treatment where required (where necessary contact police and ensure emergency phone numbers are readily available)
- provide access to support (eg practical and emotional)
- provide a coordinated response
- record incident details
- conduct an incident review/investigation
- notify HSRs.

Further information

WorkSafe Advisory Service

Toll-free 1800 136 089

info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

worksafe.vic.gov.au

Related WorkSafe publications

Prevention and management of aggression in health services, 2008

Working safely in community services, 2006

Working safely in visiting health services, 2006

Working alone, 2011

Preventing and responding to bullying at work, 2009

WorkSafe OHS compliance kits –

Children's services, disability services, home care, community support services

Volunteer health and safety –

a handbook for community service organisations, 2008

Other related publications

Victorian Home Care Industry OHS Guide, 2005

Available from worksafe.vic.gov.au

and health.vic.gov.au

Occupational violence: Risk assessment checklist

All employers should carry out a regular check of the workplace in consultation with health and safety representatives and workers to identify if there are signs that occupational violence is happening or could happen (risk identification), and take steps to implement solutions to control risks.

This checklist is designed to help employers meet their legal obligations to manage risks associated with occupational violence.

Follow the checklist to assess the risks and list possible solutions to be implemented.

This checklist is not exhaustive. You may need to consider other factors that are unique to your workplace. Add these to the 'additional factors' section of this checklist. There are also other tools found in the publication, *Working safely in visiting health services* that you may use to assess risks of occupational violence in your workplace (see the example checklists for referral information and initial safety assessment information).

If you tick YES to any of the questions below, implement risk control measures such as those mentioned under 'solutions for occupational violence' in this document. Retain a copy of this document if you use it to identify a risk of injury or risk control.

Incident/Injury records	Yes (risk control needed)	No	Solutions	Comments
Have there been any incidents of occupational violence in the last 12 months? Have workers been threatened or assaulted in the past? Have these incidents resulted in serious injury or impact?				
Work environment	Yes (risk control needed)	No	Solutions	Comments
Does the building have multiple access points? Is access to alarms difficult or too obvious? Is work done in unfamiliar environments? Is the environment uncomfortable for clients? Does the physical layout fail to provide privacy for clients? Is it easy for a client to get physical access to a worker? Are workers working in isolated locations? Is it difficult for workers to go to a safe place if in danger? Is it difficult for workers to communicate when threatened? Is visibility impaired? Is visibility of the working environment from outside the building inadequate? Is external lighting inadequate?				

More information about Occupational violence

Work practices	Yes (risk control needed)	No	Solutions	Comments
<p>Are there likely to be service delays that are not communicated to the client?</p> <p>Are there likely to be circumstances that would frustrate clients?</p> <p>Are staffing numbers insufficient at demand times?</p> <p>Are workers providing community outreach services?</p> <p>Do workers ever work alone or in isolated locations?</p> <p>Would it be difficult for a worker to seek assistance if threatened or assaulted?</p> <p>Would it be difficult for another person to see that assistance was needed if an incident occurred?</p> <p>Does the workplace lack security and emergency procedures?</p> <p>Does the workplace fail to regularly check and test security and emergency procedures?</p> <p>Does the workplace lack a clear process for dealing with conflict and aggression?</p> <p>Does the workplace lack procedures to deal with violence during and after an event?</p>				
Worker training	Yes (risk control needed)	No	Solutions	Comments
<p>Are there inexperienced workers in front line positions?</p> <p>Are there any workers that have not received training in how to deal with aggression and/or challenging behaviour?</p> <p>Are there any workers that do not have appropriate workplace knowledge and skills to deal with clients?</p> <p>Are any workers unaware of policies or procedures about occupational violence?</p>				

More information about Occupational violence

Behaviour	Yes (risk control needed)	No	Solutions	Comments
Are clients/service users likely to be distressed or aggressive? Is the behaviour of the client(s) unpredictable? Is an aggressor likely to have a weapon? Is there likely to be more than one aggressor? Is an aggressor likely to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs? There is no method to assess or identify potential for aggression or violence				
Additional factors				

This fact sheet provides information in relation to your health and safety obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act) only. It should not be viewed as a definitive guide to the law, and should be read in conjunction with the OHS Act. You should seek advice about other legal duties that may apply to your organisation.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and completeness of this fact sheet, the advice contained herein may not apply in every circumstance. Accordingly, the Victorian WorkCover Authority cannot be held responsible, and extends no warranties as to the suitability of the information for your specific circumstances; or actions taken by third parties as a result of information contained in this fact sheet.