
WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND COVID-19: WHAT EMPLOYERS IN THE RETAIL/SERVICE SECTOR NEED TO KNOW?

Overview

It is no surprise how uncertainty during this pandemic is straining our mental health. Although most people are not violent by nature, but increasing feelings of injustice and loss of control, combined with higher stress and anxiety can result in more aggressive outbursts and incidents of violence in the workplace.

Employers need to understand the risk of violence and harassment to their workers. A thorough risk assessment could help. They must ensure all aspects of their program are compliant with their legal obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. While we are going to focus on violence in this article, employers should also look at the requirements for addressing harassment in their workplace.

What is Workplace Violence?

The Occupational Health and Safety Act defines workplace violence as:

- The use of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or could cause physical injury to the worker;
- An attempt to use physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to a worker;
- A statement or behavior that is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to use physical force against a worker, in a workplace that could cause physical injury to the worker.

These definitions also include incidents of domestic violence that might impact the workplace. For example, an abusive partner might come to their partner's workplace to hurt or harass them. In other cases, both partners may work together and if there is violence in the relationship, it could spill over into the workplace.

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How COVID-19 is increasing workplace violence

Every employer and worker in Ontario has been impacted by COVID-19. As we reopen businesses carefully, things are not like they used to be pre-pandemic. We now find ourselves using terms like “new normal” to help define how work will look and feel for the foreseeable future.

Retail and service sector businesses are specifically impacted by the increased risk of workplace violence. Due to COVID-19, these industries are asked to convey messages of health and safety to their customers. Retail and service sector employees are finding themselves on the front line having to ask people to change the way they shop, eat out and interact with others. Some of these store compliance protocols that workers are being asked to communicate and enforce include:

- Masking
- Distancing
- Maximum number of occupants
- Hand sanitizing
- Purchase limits for some products
- Method of payment (no cash)
- Following directional markings

People can be resistant to change. While most customers are willing to comply with these additional safety measures, some people may become agitated, aggressive or violent when confronted.

Different factors increase the incidents of violence towards retail and service sector staff. These include:

- **Stress.** Disasters and other crisis such as pandemics can result a continuous state of uncertainty and worry that triggers an overexposure of stress hormones. These hormones are known to be associated with increased aggression.
- **Lack of control.** Some people don't want to be told what to do at the best of times. When we consider all the other stressors they may be experiencing, their reaction to being told to wear a mask or wait in line can have a triggering effect.
- **Anxiety.** Anxiety is a very normal response to unfamiliar situations and events. For some who experience extreme anxiety, just leaving the house during these uncertain times can be very difficult. When faced with a stressful situation, some people may respond with a “fight” response to help minimize the threat.

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All of these factors and more, when combined with workers who may not have the skills and training to handle aggressive customers in an effective way, could work together to create a perfect storm for increased incidents of workplace violence. Although businesses are not able to control these external factors, violence anticipation and response plans can greatly improve outcomes.

What we do about it

The Occupational Health and Safety Act sets out the duties of workplace parties in respect to workplace violence and harassment. All employers should be reviewing the programs they currently have in place to ensure they are still accurate with the increased risks that workers may be facing.

At a minimum, workplaces need to:

- Review and update the workplace violence **risk assessment**
 - Consider if you have created additional roles that may include someone at the entrance of the store to keep track of the number of customers and ensure safety protocols are being followed.
 - Have you added plexiglas or other physical barriers? These barriers are very effective at keeping staff protected from the virus, but they could create additional hazards if workers are not able to easily remove themselves from an area when there is a threat.
 - Have other entrances and exits to the facility been restricted? Assess if employees are still able to remove themselves from a potentially dangerous situation.
 - Have you considered the increased risk of domestic violence? It is estimated that incidents of domestic violence have increased by about 20% during the pandemic.
- Ensure your workplace violence **policy** is up to date and has been reviewed at least annually
 - This is an opportunity to work with your Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) or Safety Representatives to craft a policy that works with the changing needs of your workplace.
- Set-up and maintain **programs** to implement your workplace violence and harassment policies
 - This will include what measures and procedures you are taking to protect workers from the risks workers may be exposed to as identified in your risk assessment
 - How workers are to report incidents of violence
 - Measures for workers to call for assistance when workplace violence occurs or is likely to occur
 - How employers will investigate incidents of workplace violence
- Provide workers with **information and instruction** on workplace violence
- Ensure your programs address **domestic violence**. How the employer will handle situations where they find that a worker is at risk of physical violence

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In addition to the above legal requirements, consider some of these workplace violence prevention and mitigation strategies:

- Have you set your workers up for success in roles that require a high degree of interaction with customers and could include abusive behaviour?
 - When hiring for these roles, consider the soft skills. For example, listening, staying calm, empathy, humour, confidence, and kindness.
 - Provide training on de-escalation and crisis intervention. This will equip workers with the skills to keep themselves safe in violent situations. De-escalation will help workers to identify when they are at risk of violence and give them tools to calm the customer. Crisis intervention goes as far as equipping workers with skills for managing a situation when a customer physically assaults them.
- Provide staff working in high-risk roles with an effective means of calling assistance. This could be a panic alarm, screamer device, or radio.
 - Create protocols and train staff on how to respond to these calls for assistance. These protocols may include:
 - Who responds (best practice is safety in numbers and as many people as possible should respond)
 - How do they respond (get others to safety, someone calls 911, etc.)
 - Who investigates following the incident
- Do not have workers in high-risk roles working in isolation. Create working alone procedures that include control measures such as, ensuring another worker is present in the line-of-sight or a buddy check-in system.
- Facilitate debriefs following any incident and offer support to all workers involved. This may include referral to an employee assistance program or a distress hotline.
- Talk about domestic violence with your staff and encourage them to tell someone if they are concerned for their safety.

COVID-19 has changed the way we work in so many ways. While we have a better grasp on how we can protect workers from the virus, there are additional hazards, such as workplace violence, that cannot be overlooked. More resources given below can help you recognize, assess and control hazards associated with workplace violence to keep everyone in our workplaces safe.

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Resources

Workplace Safety and Prevention Services. (December 5th, 2019). WSPS Workplace Violence and Harassment Toolbox. Retrieved from:
<https://www.wsps.ca/WSPS/media/Site/Resources/Downloads/WSPS-Workplace-Violence-and-Harassment-Toolbox.pdf?ext=.pdf>

Public Services Health and Safety Association. (2010). Domestic Violence. Retrieved from:
<https://www.pshsa.ca/resources/domestic-violence>

Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. (August, 2017). Health and Safety Guidelines Workplace Violence and Harassment: Understanding the Law. Retrieved from:
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/understand-law-workplace-violence-and-harassment>

Crisis Prevention Institute. (August 2003). De-escalation Tips. Retrieved from:
<https://www.crisisprevention.com/en-CA/Blog/De-escalation-Tips>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. Health and Safety Fact Sheets (OSH Answers): Violence and Bullying. Retrieved from:
https://www.ccohs.ca/topics/hazards/psychosocial/violence/#ctgt_wb-auto-3

NOTE: This document is intended for informational purposes only to provide an overview of the potential hazards posed in the workplace due to COVID-19. It is not intended as medical advice, to provide a comprehensive risk assessment for all workplaces, or to replace any legislated workplace safety obligations. WSPS has not endorsed and does not endorse any particular product or company as a solution to the risk presented by COVID-19. Due to the ongoing evolution of the situation in Ontario and around the world, this document may be used as a guide for Employers in addition to guidance delivered by public health authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Ontario Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Any use which is made of this document by any Employer or individual, or any reliance on or decisions to be made based on it, are the responsibility of the Employer or individual. WSPS and its partners, officers, directors, employees, agents, representatives, suppliers and service providers accept no responsibility for any errors or omissions in content or for damages of any kind or nature suffered by any Employer or any third party as a result of use of or reliance on this communication..

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