

Workplace Violence & Bullying — Managing Risks

By Christopher Boman & Dennis Moschella

Each day, thousands of American workers are harassed, intimidated, threatened and verbally or physically attacked. And bullying is three times more prevalent than sexual harassment. While only the sensational cases seem to make the headlines, threats and harassment in the workplace are a serious concern for employers.

However, employers can manage their risk by implementing preventative measures. (An EA professional should be able to assist.)

❖ **Conduct thorough background checks** — Employers could be liable if someone carries out a violent act and has a criminal record such as charges for carrying a concealed weapon, stalking, battery, etc. Ensure thorough background checks and drug tests are conducted for every hire and that risky behavior indicators are reported to HR.

❖ **Expand company policies** — Studies show that fewer than 30% of businesses have a workplace violence prevention policy. Adopt and publicize a zero-tolerance policy regarding threats, harassment (including bullying and cyber-stalking) and violence in the workplace. Company policies can help prevent potential problems before they escalate into something more destructive. In addition,

regularly train all managers and employees on company policies, violation reporting guidelines, and investigation procedures.

❖ **Understand the psychology of bullying** — Studies show that 71% of bullies outrank their targets and 40% of bullying targets don't tell anyone. This is an important step in helping staff report bullying, as it shows that most people don't report it because it's their boss bullying them. Understanding both the bully's and the victim's psychology can help employers address issues in a manner that yields positive results.

❖ **Learn the warning signs** — Warning signs can indicate a potential problem, including verbal threats, paranoid behavior, extreme depression, disregard for worker safety, or a romantic obsession with someone in the workplace. Ensure that both management and staff report potential warning signs.

❖ **Don't discount third party harassment** — Remember that many employees deal with vendors and other third parties throughout the workday, and that

employer liability can extend to interaction with these individuals. If bullying or other harassment by third parties is conveyed to employers, the company must address the problem as soon as it's reported.

❖ **Don't forget the financial impact** — The financial costs to businesses each year as the result of bullying and workplace violence threats and incidents are estimated to range from \$36 billion to \$120 billion. These numbers reflect absenteeism, decreased productivity, high turnover, theft and sabotage at work, medical care and increased accidents on the job and litigation. Experts advise that the return on investment for a business to implement a workplace violence prevention and education program is real and quantifiable.

❖ **The impact of bullying** — One study indicated that 75% of people bullied in the workplace will leave their jobs. You may lose some of your best workers if they're being targeted.

❖ **Call on the experts** — Consultants and legal experts are a smart investment to identify potential risks, mitigate actual threats, and offer solutions for companies to protect themselves and their employees. ■



Christopher J. Boman is a partner at the Irvine, Calif. office of the employment law firm Fisher & Phillips LLP. Dennis B. Moschella is managing director and workforce violence specialist for the Los Angeles office of i-fact@analysis, inc., a private investigations firm.

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