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Contact:

Mike Matulis 217-785-1719

Michael.Matulis@illinois.gov

Violence on the Job is a Growing Concern

Having a plan to address workplace violence is vital

SPRINGFIELD -- Staying safe on the job can call for varied approaches and protocols – wearing proper safety equipment, not driving while drowsy or impaired, following safety guidelines for machinery and many more. But increasingly, workers are also concerned about their safety from violence at their workplaces.

About 2 million American workers annually are victims of workplace violence.

“Unfortunately, making sure people are safe on their jobs also includes making sure they are protected from violent actions, whether from coworkers or from outside threats,” said Michael D. Kleinik, director, Illinois Department of Labor.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) defines workplace violence as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.”

Media accounts of tragic and sensational violent acts by disgruntled fellow workers certainly capture attention. But such cases make up a relatively small percentage of workplace violence events. More often the problem stems from outside the workplace. Robberies by outsiders far outnumber violent acts by fellow workers.

The taxicab industry has the highest risk for workplace violence, nearly 60 times the national average for violence on the job, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. And while one might accurately guess that police and security personnel face a significant threat of workplace violence, retail sales workers are the most numerous victims, with about 330,000 attacked each year, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration stresses that workplace violence:

- Is a growing concern for employers and their employees.
- Can happen at any place of work.
- Is one of the leading causes of job-related deaths.

Nothing will stop all workplace violence, but employers can make a difference.

“They need to have a comprehensive site-specific and job-specific workplace violence prevention program that everyone has been trained on,” said Ben Noven, director of Illinois OSHA, a division of the Illinois Department of Labor.

Noven notes that violence is a concern both in private and public sector jobs.

“We have responded to reports of injuries at public schools, nursing care facilities, and prisons. These are industries and professions known for having issues with understaffing and high turnover, and at times emotions can run high due to the nature of the work environment,” said Noven. “This can increase the likelihood that violent incidents may occur, making a violence-prevention plan all that more important.”

Establishing a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence against or by employees is the best protection an employer can offer, according to OSHA. But other precautions should also be taken.

- Provide safety education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable, what to do if they witness or experience such conduct and how to protect themselves.
- Secure the workplace. Surveillance cameras, proper lighting, key or badge entry and guards can all help alleviate possible violence at work.
- Encourage employees to alert supervisors to any concerns they have about coworkers’ erratic or potentially dangerous behavior as well as any other safety issue they believe could lead to violence at work.
- Provide for a buddy system or escort service for employees who need it in potentially dangerous situations or at night.

Employee safety is the main reason to take such precautions, but workplace violence poses an economic price tag as well. The private Workplace Violence Research Institute estimates the annual cost of violence in the workplace to be \$36 billion.

For more information on Illinois OSHA visit <https://www2.illinois.gov/idol/Laws-Rules/safety/Pages/default.aspx>