

Can it happen here?

**Oregon OSHA's concise guide
to preventing aggression
where you work**



About this document

Can it happen here? is an Oregon OSHA Standards and Technical Resources publication. Thanks to the following individuals for advice and technical assistance:

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Inside

- ❑ **Can it happen where you work?**
- ❑ **Is it workplace aggression or workplace violence?**
- ❑ **Types of hostile acts**
- ❑ **If you're an employer**
- ❑ **Keeping your workplace safe**
- ❑ **A violence-prevention checklist**



Can it happen where you work?

“I just snapped, man...” – A patient on why he assaulted a worker at Oregon State Hospital’s program for the criminally insane.
– Statesman Journal (Salem, Oregon), March 1, 2006

“We’ve never seen a case where someone just snapped. In every single one, there are a series of events that either someone ignored or did not respond to adequately.” – Marc McElhaneey, Ph.D., on ignoring the signs of violence. – “Workforce Management,” Feb. 27, 2006

Between 2001 and 2005, assaults and other violent acts injured 1,338 Oregon workers where they work.¹ That’s about 268 incidents each year in which workers are unable to do their jobs when they become victims of workplace violence.

Many people think of workplace violence as “employee violence” but most employees aren’t violent. In Oregon, victims of workplace violence tend to be nursing aides, police officers, guards, and teachers. The *offenders*? Health care and residential care patients; criminal suspects, shoplifters, and prison inmates; and students. And the *workplaces*? State hospitals, private health care and social services, public schools, protective services and correctional facilities.

You may never encounter aggressive or violent people where you work, but you should think seriously about the risk that something could happen. *If you find yourself thinking, “It can’t happen here,” you should reconsider.* Even one violent incident is expensive; costs may include medical care, liability, legal fees, as well as lost business and productivity. The medical and time-loss costs for the 1,338 Oregon workers injured by workplace violence averaged more than \$12,000 per worker.²

Workplace violence in Oregon; where the risks are highest

- **Victims** Nursing aides, police officers, guards, and teachers
- **Offenders** Health care and residential care patients; criminal suspects, shoplifters, and prison inmates
- **Workplaces** State hospitals, private health care and social services, public schools, protective services and correctional facilities

1) These were disabling injuries that left workers unable to do their jobs for more than three days.
2) DCBS Information Management Division, accepted disabling claims, 2001-2005

Is it workplace aggression or workplace violence?

When people talk about workplace violence they may be referring to a range of hostile acts – from threats and intimidation to homicide. **Workplace violence** includes acts such as physical assault, arson, bombing, sabotage, and hostage-taking. **Workplace aggression** includes violent acts as well as nonviolent acts such as harassment, intimidation, and threats that create a hostile work environment.

■ **Workplace aggression**

Any act that creates a hostile work environment and that affects employees' physical or psychological well-being.

■ **Workplace violence**

Any physical attack on an employee.



Types of hostile acts

There are four basic types:

- Acts by those who have no interest in the workplace other than robbery or another crime.
- Acts by customers, clients, patients, inmates, or any other person for whom an organization provides services.
- Acts by a current or former employee against co-workers and supervisors.
- Acts by someone who has a personal relationship with an employee – an abusive spouse or partner, for example.



If you're an employer

Oregon OSHA can cite employers who do not protect their employees from violent acts under provisions of the state's Safe Employment Act that requires all workplaces to be safe and healthful.

Oregon courts have also ruled that employers may be liable if they do not adequately protect their employees from **aggressive** or **violent** acts. Typically, courts weigh their decisions on employers' answers to questions about whether they knew about the acts and what steps they had taken to prevent them. Key questions for employers:

- Do you have a written violence prevention policy?
- Have you established a plan to control aggressive behavior at your workplace?
- Have your employees been trained to recognize, respond to, and report acts of workplace aggression?

State trooper sues agency in harassment

An Oregon State Police trooper who claims a fellow trooper attempted to rape her and then endured retaliation and abuse for reporting the act, has filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the agency.

– *The Oregonian*, Oct. 26, 2006

Keeping your workplace safe

You can protect employees from workplace aggression just as you protect them from other hazards. Act on the following:

- Commit to safety
- Involve employees
- Evaluate your risks
- Develop a policy
- Establish safety procedures
- Train employees
- Evaluate your effort

“More than 70 percent of United States workplaces have no formal program or policy that addresses workplace violence.”

*– Summary of findings,
Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Survey of Workplace
Violence Prevention, 2005*

Commit to safety

Safety starts with commitment from the top. Managers must show that they will not tolerate behavior that could lead to violence in the workplace. Employees will not step forward with their concerns if they think that management will ignore them.

Involve employees

Your safety committee should be involved creating a written policy, evaluating risks, and establishing safety procedures. If your business doesn't have a safety committee, ask for volunteers. And if no one volunteers? Consider the risk of doing nothing.

Some organizations say they have an open-door policy but don't follow it in practice. Does your organization really encourage employees to talk about their concerns?

Employees need to feel that they can tell managers or supervisors about their concerns without fear of retaliation. They need to know that supervisors will listen to their concerns and respond to them promptly.

Evaluate your risks

You probably know the likely sources of aggression if you work in a health care setting, a social service agency, a public school, or a prison – but do you know how to control them? Acts of aggression in the workplace are preventable; the challenge is determining precisely why they're happening. An effective risk assessment will help you uncover the root causes of hostile acts and decide how to respond to them appropriately. A risk assessment should also identify weaknesses in your physical facilities that could increase the risk of a hostile act.



Develop a policy

A brief, written policy should tell employees that aggressive or violent behavior will not be tolerated and that all incidents will be taken seriously and will be dealt with appropriately. Key points of an effective policy:

- All employees are responsible for maintaining a safe workplace.
- Management will respond appropriately to all reports of workplace aggression or violence.
- Management will stop inappropriate behavior.
- Management will support employees and supervisors in their efforts to prevent hostile acts at work.

Establish safety procedures

If you know the types of hostile acts that could occur in your workplace and where they are likely to occur, you can establish procedures that tell employees how to respond to them. You should have one procedure that tells employees how to respond if they feel threatened and a set of follow-up procedures to evaluate an incident and prevent it from happening again.

Essential procedures:

- How to respond to an incident
- How to report an incident
- How to evaluate security after a threat
- How to follow up after a threat

Train employees

All employees must understand your organization's policy, recognize situations that may become hostile, and know how to respond to them. Managers and supervisors should also know best practices for dealing with layoffs and terminations, disciplining employees, and resolving conflict.

Evaluate your effort

At least once a year take stock of your effort to control the risk of violence. Review all acts of aggression: determine why existing procedures did not prevent them and what needs to be done to prevent them from happening again. Also, consider new risks that may require an update to existing policy, safety procedures, or required employee training.

A violence-prevention checklist

- ❑ Managers are committed to preventing aggression and violence in the workplace.
- ❑ Employees feel that managers will respond to their concerns about possible aggressive or violent acts in the workplace.
- ❑ Managers and supervisors know best practices for resolving conflict.
- ❑ The safety committee – or other volunteers – helps create policy, evaluate risks, and develop procedures for responding to hostile acts.
- ❑ There is a written policy that tells employees hostile acts will not be tolerated and will be dealt with appropriately.
- ❑ There is a written plan to control aggressive or violent behavior in the workplace.
- ❑ The potential for violence and security threats was identified with a written risk assessment.
- ❑ There is a written procedure that tells employees how to respond to violent acts and a set of follow-up procedures for evaluating incidents and preventing them from recurring.
- ❑ Employees have been trained to recognize, respond to, and report potentially violent acts.
- ❑ All violent acts and reports of aggression are evaluated at least once a year.

