Workplace Violence – Healthcare Industry

Workers in healthcare settings have significant exposures to workplace violence that can result in fatal & life-changing injuries. These noteworthy exposures can come from patients or residents, their family members, facility visitors, and potentially from healthcare workers including physicians, managers, supervisors and other co-workers. Common healthcare workplace violence situations include verbal (swearing, screaming, threatening, or shouting) to physical (hitting, spitting, pinching, scratching, biting, hair-pulling or grabbing). These potentially serious events can result in minor to significant physical injuries, temporary or permanent disability, psychological trauma or even death. Workplace violence situations also have a negative impact on organizational culture as they adversely impact worker morale and increase work stress and staff turnover.

While the number of reported workplace violence encounters continue to rise, it is important to note that many minor encounters or early indicators of potential violence are not reported. There are many reasons why employees may not report a concern including:

- Perception that it is just "part of the job"

- Lack of policies, procedures, staff training or supports

- Organizational culture that discourages reporting

- Process that is too timely for reporting concerns

- Employee perception that they did not do enough to defuse the situation

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There are a variety of direct and indirect risk factors knowingly impacting the healthcare industry. Common risk factors for healthcare settings include the following:

- Working directly with combative residents/patients

- Transporting residents/patients who do not want to be moved or do not understand why they are being moved

- Situations that create long waits for residents/patients to receive care

- Working in conditions which are understaffed or that involve lone workers, extended shifts, or overtime requirements

- Increased resident or patient load

- Pandemic policies, particularly related to those accompanying the person seeking treatment or being cared for

- Inadequate facility security or security personnel onsite

- Lack of staff training and policies for handling and reporting workplace violence situations

- Co-worker bullying

- Stressed and disgruntled family members

- Domestic violence

- Drug and alcohol abuse

- Access to firearms

- Insufficient lighting (interior and exterior)

- Organizational changes, such as probation, termination, layoffs, and restructures

- Cost containment requirements

- Resident medical conditions including:

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  - Frustration resulting from difficulty communicating needs or wants
  - Anger due to memory loss or inability to complete tasks
  - Fear, misunderstanding, or strong reactions due to decreased comprehension of their environment
  - Changes in medication and associated side effects
  - Increased patient morbidities
  - Physical health including pain, poor eyesight or impaired hearing
  - Conditions affecting self-control, judgement, decision making, reactions, and other behaviors
  - Social impacts such as boredom, loneliness, lack of trust, dislike of certain people, or fear of judgement of their condition
  - Feeling overwhelmed with the environment, people, or activity

Prevention strategies for healthcare settings include the following:

- Develop emergency signaling, alarms and monitoring systems that are easily accessible when needed

- Facility layout/design: multiple exits, adequate lighting, enclosed nurses' stations, etc.

- Provide onsite security personnel, cameras and good lighting

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- Encourage a positive workplace culture that creates a trusting atmosphere, shares perceptions of the importance of safety, measures safety programs, and promotes a no-blame environment

- Restrict entry areas

- Adjust staff scheduling to reduce lone workers

- Enhance communication to reduce wait times for residents/patients seeking treatment

- Dress for safety (i.e. no loose jewelry, hair, clothing, dangling cords, etc.)

- Train how to recognize exposures, manage the situations and resolve conflicts

- Position yourself (when possible) in such a way as to have an escape path available in case it is needed

- Create clear and concise reporting procedures, with management communication throughout the post reporting process to ensure resolution and change

- Resident Care Plans: learn about the resident and what might trigger aggressive behavior; understand the care plan, update it frequently and communicate changes with co-workers; and, communicate with the resident to assist in building relationships

- Develop a comprehensive Workplace Violence Program

- Create a Task Force for program development

- Evaluate preventative measures

- Offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and Wellness programs that allow for services to address stress, grieving, mental health and addiction

- Establish a Threat or Incident Reporting Process for verbal and physical situations arising from internal and external sources to the organization

- Implement a training process with initial rollout, orientation, on-boarding and annual refresher components

- Conduct drills to practice responses for all scenarios

- Utilize outside resources to collaborate on development, like local law enforcement, public health officials and your insurance carrier

In all workplace violence situations, the employee is encouraged to remove themselves from the situation, call for security and report the incident to management immediately.