

# Safer Spaces

## *Workplace violence and harassment policies can help to protect workers from serious risks*

The workplace can be a dangerous environment. The Criminal Victimization in the Workplace report from Statistics Canada shows that almost one in five violent incidents will occur in these surroundings. The Ontario Ministry of Labour even suggests that transportation related workplaces are at a higher risk than many other settings.

Consider where the related threats can emerge. Angry customers may confront a driver who arrives late with a load, disagreements between coworkers could escalate into a brawl, and thieves are always looking for ways to target valuable freight.

As of June 15, changes to Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act require the province's employers to prepare policies to address workplace violence just like this, implement programs to protect employees, and inform workers about the policies, procedures and steps they can take to protect themselves.

A key step in developing these policies will be to identify any risks that exist, and they will vary from one job to the next. Those who work in a fixed location such as a truck stop or

fuel island, for example, may be at a higher risk if they handle cash or work in small numbers. Drivers themselves can become targets if they are hauling valuable cargo through an isolated area.

Tools such as surveys, focus groups and discussions by a joint health and safety committee can all help to identify the risky jobs and surroundings alike. But fleets can also pinpoint trends by reviewing internal reports about violent incidents, and by analyzing a variety of crime statistics from local police departments. Statistics Canada's Crime Statistics in Canada reports track the calls for assistance and the nature of the crimes that take place in every jurisdiction, so that can be a good place to start as well.

They are all details that can help to enhance existing initiatives such as the policies regarding workplace violence, occupational health and safety, or workplace harassment.



Then it is a matter of taking steps to minimize or eliminate the risks themselves.

A few simple steps can make the difference. Consider what can be done to support an otherwise isolated driver. Cell phones could be programmed with an emergency contact, including the phone numbers that can be called at any time of the day. The use of a code word can give drivers a way to report a threat if they are unable to talk freely. And the same tracking system used to follow fleet assets can help to identify a truck that is suddenly straying from a designated route, perhaps because of a hijacking.

Some of the efforts will involve finding ways to avoid the threats before they become a reality. For example, those who are spending time on the road might need to learn about how to be aware of their surroundings when getting in and out of the truck, the need to lock vehicle doors, and features they should look for when choosing an area to park. The safety in a fleet yard can also be enhanced by introducing security patrols, or by joining neighboring businesses to coordinate security efforts. Meanwhile, the regular maintenance of fences, lighting and mirrors will ensure that the tools of safety are available when they are needed.

In many cases, the violent incidents can even be diffused before they ever occur. That might require a policy of informing customers about delays before a shipment is due at a loading dock.

Coworkers can also learn how to identify the signs of domestic violence around them. Victims will often try to cover bruises, have trouble concentrating, or suddenly begin to make last-minute excuses or miss work more frequent than usual. The abusers themselves might even show up in the workplace, pestering coworkers with questions or displaying other controlling tendencies.

Workers should never take physical action against a threat, but they can call police to investigate situations, and request restraining orders that can keep the abuser away from the

workplace and victim alike.

Together, they are the steps that will create the safer surroundings that every employee deserves.

For more information on developing an action plan to prevent violence and harassment in the workplace, go to [www.cchst.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/violence.html](http://www.cchst.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/violence.html).

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