



# **MENDOCINO COUNTY VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM**

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# WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION PLAN

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# **WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION PLAN**

## **PURPOSE**

The County of Mendocino is dedicated to serving a wide range of citizens. Providing services to its citizenry can sometimes place County employees in a position of vulnerability to violent or threatening behavior. Recently adopted Cal/OSHA Guidelines for Workplace Security identify certain County employees as especially vulnerable to assault and require inclusion of systems, procedures and training as part of the County's Safety Manual to address these risks. The Board of Supervisors is committed to providing and maintaining a safe and healthful working environment for its employees and the public they serve, consistent with these requirements. This Plan is intended to suggest preventative planning measures to comply with State law and not to create any additional mandatory duties or other bases for claims against the County where none otherwise would exist.

The purpose of this Plan is to:

- Facilitate reduction of the risk of workplace violence;
- Assist in the protection of employees and the public from injury, consistent with State law, should an incident of workplace violence occur;
- Recognize the types and levels of workplace violence;
- Identify potential perpetrators and threats of violence;
- Improve employees' ability to defuse a hostile situation.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES**

The County intends workplace security and safety to be made a high concern of all employees, and to this end,

- ***Department Heads***  
Department heads shall ensure that this Plan is fully implemented and adapted, where necessary, to the unique needs of their departments and work locations and that it is clearly communicated to all employees in their department.
- ***Managers and Supervisors***  
Managers and supervisors shall investigate all reported threats of violence, real or perceived, providing support for employees and taking appropriate actions to help prevent acts of violence through the preventative planning measures described below. Managers and supervisors shall also provide information and training on workplace security for employees.
- ***Employees***  
All employees shall place safety as their highest concern and shall immediately report all threats and/or acts of violence. Employees are responsible for participating in training, for becoming familiar with this Plan, and for learning to recognize and respond to behaviors of potential perpetrators of violence as described in the preventative planning measures that follow.

## **PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE**

Violence, or the threat of violence, against or by any employee or any other person in the workplace environment will not be tolerated. Anyone who demonstrates or threatens violent behavior may be subject to disciplinary action and/or criminal prosecution. Violent acts include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Striking, punching, slapping or assaulting another person;
  - Fighting or challenging another person to fight;
  - Grabbing, pinching or touching another person in an unwanted way;
  - Engaging in dangerous, threatening or unwanted horseplay;
  - Possession, use, or threat of use of a gun, knife or other weapon of any kind on County property, including parking lots or other exterior premises, in County vehicles, or while engaged in activities for the County in other locations, unless such possession or use is a requirement of the job;
  - Stalking;
  - Threatening harm or harming another person, or any other action or conduct that implies the threat of bodily harm.
- **Protection Through Planning**  
To the extent necessary to comply with the purpose of this Plan, each department head shall:
    - Define specific roles and responsibilities of each employee in each work location;
    - Identify and post the evacuation routes and safe assembly areas;
    - Provide for initial and ongoing training for managers, supervisors and employees;
    - Develop alternative modes of communication, such as portable radios, cordless telephones, cellular telephones, silent alarms, buzzers, and intercom systems, where appropriate;
    - Identify protective measures and procedures for employees who perform tasks, which may involve a greater risk of violence;
    - Obtain employee information for notification of relatives and next of kin, should an incident occur;
    - Develop reception desk and visitor entry procedures and post in a visible location for staff to access.
- **Protection Through Building Security**  
County facilities must be accessible to the public. However, there are certain measures that can be taken to protect employees and the public. Here are some suggestions to improve building security:
    - Provide a physical barrier to control access to employee work areas;
    - Identify all possible escape routes for all employees
    - Establish a system to identify potential problems. Install a buzzer or silent alarm that alerts other employees that a problem exists at the central reception area. An alternative is to have a code name to be announced over the intercom, which can alert other employees of a potential problem.
    - Inspect exterior lighting, especially in employee parking areas.

- Inspect exterior landscaping adjacent to buildings and identify areas, which create potential hiding places near entrances, walkways and parking areas.
- Ensure all non-public entrances are kept closed and locked at all times. Post signs directing clients to public entrances.
- Post emergency telephone numbers.

Protective measures are not a fail-safe protection against workplace violence. Department heads, supervisors, safety representatives and employees should continually assess protective security measures. All concerns should be brought to the attention of your supervisor or safety representative. Practice common sense and be aware!

- **Protection From Unknown Persons**

Some types of workplace violence, such as armed robbery and assault, involve a perpetrator who is unknown to the employee. This can be someone who comes into your building or who you encounter while out on County business. To protect yourself from this type of crime, consider doing the following:

- When entering or exiting a building, early in the morning, late at night, or on weekends, try to have a co-worker with you -- institute the "buddy system".
- If you have to work late in a County building, move your car to a well-lighted area near the building exit before it gets dark.
- Walk in well-lighted areas as much as possible.
- Walk confidently and at a steady pace. If you think you are being followed, go to a public area or building.
- Face traffic when you walk, and avoid bushes, doorways, and other places where someone could hide.
- If possible, do not carry a purse, or carry it over your shoulder and wear your coat over it to conceal it, or hold it in front of you without the strap on your shoulder or neck, folding your arms over it like a football player.
- Never leave your car with the engine running, and don't leave the keys in the ignition.
- If people ask you for directions, politely, but firmly, tell them you do not know and stay well away from them.
- Keep your car doors locked when parked and when driving. Close all windows tightly.
- Try not to park next to vans, especially vans without windows.
- As you approach your car, survey the area as you are walking. Have your keys out and ready to use. (You can also use keys to defend yourself.) Before you unlock the door, check under the car and in the back seat.
- If your car breaks down, open the hood and tie a white flag to the antenna or display a "Call Police" sign. Stay in the locked car, and if people approach, open your window just enough to ask them to call for help. Do not open your car door.

- **Protection From Clients and the Public**

Many County clients are under a great deal of stress and may be frustrated or angry before they walk in your office or meet with you in the field. A respectful greeting, a smile, and a listening ear can help calm an inflamed temper. Avoid raising your voice. Make an extra

effort to understand and be understood. If the person seems distracted, restate the problem to focus their mind on the issue at hand.

Stay calm, and try to keep the situation from escalating by expressing empathy for their feelings. Don't argue, but ask what you can do to help. Restate the client's position to make sure they know you understand the issue. You may want to momentarily distract the client by changing the subject. If you are not successful and have to take other action (such as summoning help by using a phone, an intercom, or a panic buzzer), do so calmly and quietly.

It is unlikely you will be able to address the major stresses in the client's life, and you may not be able to do much about the issue that may be causing frustration. In other words, there are some clients for whom no amount of gracious treatment will work. But even if the client does not calm down, there can be a great difference between a client who is merely frustrated and one who becomes violent or resorts to threats of violence. The key is to try to recognize when a client is going to become violent.

***Danger signs that may precede a violent act:***

- Observe the client's body language, facial expressions and tone of voice to see if he or she is getting more and more agitated.
- Clenched fists, a flushed face or tense posture are signals to be cautious.

***Protect yourself by:***

- Keeping a desk or other barrier between you and the client, and making sure that the client does not block your escape route.
  - If the client is directly in front of you, step back so that you are out of striking range.
  - If you sense that a client is going to commit a violent act any second, don't hesitate to leave immediately. Find an excuse to leave the area, or if necessary, just leave and get help from co-workers. Don't hesitate to call 9-911 if necessary.
- **Protection From Employees, Former Employees, Family Members or Acquaintances**  
A violent act is almost always preceded by a number of warning signs or changes in behavior. Since these changes can be subtle, it is important to observe behavior carefully. If you have any concerns about a co-worker's behavior, report this immediately to your supervisor. Some of these warning signs are listed below.

Use caution when reading this list as it is not intended as an evaluation tool for you to assess the stability of an employee, since a display of one or more of these signs does not necessarily mean that a person will become violent. This list is simply a summary of the kinds of behaviors displayed by individuals who have at times committed violent acts. The purpose of this list is to heighten your awareness and to help you determine if you have a cause for concern. Consider these behaviors as a whole, and don't focus on one isolated act.

- Veiled or open threats of violence, such as predicting "bad things are going to happen", especially threats that are detailed or appear to be well planned.
- A history of disciplinary actions or reacting poorly to discipline or performance evaluations.

- Irritability, belligerence, hostility.
- Excessive focus on guns, police or the military; subscription to paramilitary magazines or boasting of a weapons collection.
- Changes in behavior, such as a deterioration of work performance or an increase in concentration problems; becoming withdrawn, increasingly angry, agitated, or out of touch with reality.
- A resumption or escalation of drug and alcohol abuse.
- Reacting with great stress to workplace events such as layoffs, discharges, demotions, or reorganizations, labor disputes, or to personal or family problems such as divorce, bankruptcy, etc.
- Inability to accept responsibility by blaming others.
- Holding a grudge, especially against a supervisor or a co-worker who is alleged to have received some "favor" such as a promotion at the perpetrator's expense.
- Depression.
- Paranoia, such as statements that everyone is against them, or by panicking easily.
- An increased propensity for aggressive behavior with disregard to the safety of self or co-workers.
- Crossing a co-worker's or supervisor's physical boundaries ("getting in their face"), physical posturing or aggressiveness, stalking, excessive phone calls, etc.
- A known personal history of violent, reckless or anti-social behavior.
- References to, or identification with, mass murderers and infamous incidents of workplace violence. Having a fascination with recent incidents of workplace violence and expressing approval of the use of violence under similar circumstances.
- An obsessive involvement with the job, which becomes the sole source of identity.
- A "loner" with little or no involvement with co-workers.
- A combination of the use of stimulants, paranoid behavior, and the purchase of weapons can be a particularly risky combination.

Ask yourself, does this person make you or your co-workers uncomfortable or afraid? If you observe an employee displaying these behaviors in a way that frightens you or your co-workers, inform your supervisor immediately. The information you provide will be handled discreetly and will not be shared with anyone who does not have a legitimate need to know.

### **Stalking**

Stalking occurs when a perpetrator willfully, maliciously and repeatedly follows or harasses another person and makes a credible threat with the intent to place that person in fear for his or her safety. Stalking goes beyond mere harassment in that threats of violence are involved. A stalker can be anyone from an anonymous admirer to a former spouse.

The best way to prevent stalking is to not let a relationship, even a casual one, develop or continue any farther than you want it to. Since stalkers have never learned to take "no" for an answer, you must be clear and firm. When declining an unwanted invitation, make sure your answer cannot be interpreted in any way to mean "maybe". Don't give a reason or an excuse, which may only provide a challenge in the mind of the initiator. Don't waver; say simply and firmly, "I'm absolutely not interested in a relationship with you."

If the person does not accept your firm refusal, take the situation seriously. An individual who has a complaint involving harassment should discuss the concern as soon as possible with either the immediate supervisor, manager or Department Head for prompt resolution. If the problem continues and cannot be resolved within the department, contact Risk Management.

***A note about diversity***

If your work involves clients who are unfamiliar with American customs of greeting and speech, you should be aware that cultures vary in terms of what kinds of body language, eye contact, and verbal expressions are socially acceptable.

You may also find yourself trying to help someone who struggles with English. Slow your speech down and pronounce all consonants clearly or try using alternate or more simple wording. Refrain from raising your voice and avoid using slang, jargon or idioms.

**THREATS OF VIOLENCE**

• **Reporting Threats**

Threats of violence take many forms. They can be verbal, written, or implied (such as through the use of symbols or objects). If you are the subject of a threat of violence or if you observe threatening behavior, it is important to document your concerns and report them to your supervisor immediately. Be prepared to provide your supervisor and/or safety representative with details, including who made the threat (if known) and how and when the threat was made. Save all evidence of threats, including voice and e-mail messages, notes and letters.

Take all threats seriously. The nature or type of threat will dictate the appropriate response. If you think an act of violence is imminent, call 9-911.

If you or your supervisor is not sure if the threat should be taken seriously, report the problem to your Department Head. When in doubt, refrain from making hasty judgments, as threat assessments require extensive professional training and experience.

• **Investigating Threats**

To assist in the investigation of threats of violence, ask yourself the following questions and keep proper notes and records:

- Who made the threat?
- Against whom was the threat made?
- What is the alleged perpetrator's relationship with the victim?
- What was the specific language of the threat?
- Was there any physical contact that would lead you to believe the threatening person will follow through?
- Who witnessed the threat?
- What was the time and place where the threat occurred?
- Have there been any prior incidents of violence or threats?

- Is there any documentation such as letters, recorded phone messages, or other physical evidence?
- Is there any other information or any suggestions that would help in the investigation?

If you feel you should meet with witnesses, do so immediately. Maintain confidentiality except where the release of certain information is needed to ensure the security of others or is required by law.

- **Threat Assessment Team**

The Threat Assessment Team assists County Department Heads in determining course of action when a threat of violence takes place. Members of this team are as follows:

- Administration
- Risk Management
- County Counsel
- Human Resources
- Sheriff's Department
- Department Head

Department Heads should contact Risk Management immediately upon receiving a threat of violence within their Department. The team will be assembled and discuss what action needs to be taken.

- **Contact With the Perpetrator of the Threat**

If you need to make contact with the alleged perpetrator, make sure you are not placing yourself in danger. When making contact, ask non-threatening open-ended questions.

Be supportive in the initial stages of the conversation, but do not suggest that you would be willing to give in to demands or violate any laws, County policies, contracts, or civil service rules.

## **INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE**

If an actual incident of violence occurs in your workplace, how well you and your co-workers respond will depend largely on how well you have prepared. Each incident is different, and each response will be different. However, some common actions to take are:

- Call 9-11 immediately. If you can't speak freely, just calling and leaving the receiver off the hook will allow a dispatcher to hear noises that will clarify the nature of the incident and provide law enforcement a way to trace the location of the call.
- Use the panic button if one is installed. If you don't have access to a panic button, you may be able to use the phone or an intercom system to alert co-workers.
- Give the perpetrator what they want. Don't try to be a hero by denying a request for such items as money, keys, documents, or equipment. These can be replaced -- a human life cannot.

- Flee if you can. If you can't, try to find a hiding place.
- Cooperate fully with law enforcement on the scene. Do not question instructions they give to you. They are the professionals who know how to handle such situations and may be acting on information that you do not have.
- If you witness an act of workplace violence that does not directly involve you, your actions will depend on your assessment of the situation and your judgment. In some cases, your involvement may help a co-worker; other times it may be better to simply exit the area and call 9-911.

Record all the details of the incident, including who, what, when, where, and how and provide this information to your supervisor. Also notify the Risk Management Department by telephone immediately (463-6553).

### **TRAINING AND INFORMATION**

Although potential workplace violence cannot be precisely predicted, education and training on how to respond to all types of workplace violence can help County employees minimize the risk of violence and injury. The County will provide employees with training to help take appropriate precautions and respond wisely when confronted with a potentially violent individual. To the extent necessary to comply with the purpose of this Plan, departments will structure this training to meet the unique and specific needs of each operation or service provided.