

## **Workplace Violence in Virginia – What Should Managers and Business Owners Do?**

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Workplace violence is a widely acknowledged employment issue that first reared its head in the mid 1980's and it continues to be a topic of interest and concern to safety, risk, and human resource managers and business owners.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and their **Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities Report** (IIF), workplace homicides have declined more than 50 percent since 1994, nationally. However, with the recent workplace tragedies - the shootings at the base in Fort Hood, Texas, and the following day, the shooting at an engineering firm in Orlando, FL, one may not necessarily rely on apparently declining statistics. Actual incidents like these may well reflect a new, upward trend. In Virginia, employers and employees remain particularly sensitive to this subject as the memory of the Virginia Tech massacre remains close.

### **Virginia Statistics**

The most recent fully investigated year of BLS data in Virginia is for 2007—the year of the Virginia Tech massacre. In 2007, there were 21 workplace violence fatalities. Included in that year's data were five of the 32 deaths at Virginia Tech. These five were faculty/employees and were counted by BLS. Yet, despite Virginia Tech being the deadliest of public shootings in Virginia (as well as in the United States) its number of workers dead is less than a quarter of those who died by violence in Virginia workplaces in 2007.

What is more, according to the most recent IIF report which offers *preliminary* data for 2008, we unfortunately find that Virginia had 37 workplace violence fatalities! This number appears high and well above the national average of 10-12 per state.

Looking further back, we find that in 2006, there were 32 cases of workplace violence in Virginia. When we put these 3 data points together – 2006 (32 cases), 2007 (21 cases), 2008 (37 cases), we do notice a tendency toward large numbers. This grouping may indicate an increasing upward trend. One may not find comfort in this tendency.

### **What We Can Do**

So, let us ask this question, “What should managers and business owners do about workplace violence?”

Understanding how to respond to the current and potentially growing issues of workplace violence and its precursors is imperative. Active consideration of the following questions may

be of interest to an organization concerned about employee safety: How does a company respond to issues brought about by hard economic times, tension regarding possible layoffs, discrimination, harassment, and backlashes? Do these stressors contribute to an unsafe place of employment? What constitutes workplace violence? How is workplace violence manifested? What are its effects and what legal methods can be used to minimize or eliminate violence from the workplace?

In light of the above, it is time to dust off, review, and revamp old workplace violence policies. If a workplace violence policy does not exist, it is time to develop and implement such a program.

In this economic downturn, many organizations may feel they do not have the resources and cannot afford to implement, maintain or make adjustments in the workplace to address the issue of workplace violence. However, ignoring workplace violence may potentially increase the “cost” (or risk) to an organization through monetary exposures such as through litigation against the company and through workers’ compensation insurance premium increases. Additionally, the reduction in employee morale and productivity must be taken into consideration. But, perhaps the most poignant “cost” to consider (which may be harder to measure) is the cost to humankind that comes from the physical and mental burdens placed on the victims, their families, their co-workers, and their community as a whole.

With this in mind, employers of both public and private organizations should address the issue of workplace violence to not only reduce but to also eliminate workplace fatalities and assaults.

For further information on the topic, explore the following resources:

<http://workplaceviolencenews.com/> - A website dedicated to watching the workplace violence news

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/> - OSHA’s own workplace violence web page linking to a prevention strategy resources for a variety of industries.

<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/violence.pdf> - the FBI’s contribution

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