

Preventing workplace violence and aggression – guidance for small business

This information sheet provides advice for small business about how you can meet your work health and safety (WHS) duties to manage the risk of violence and aggression at your workplace.

What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence can be any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at the workplace or while they are carrying out work.

It can include physical assault, sexual assault, harassment or aggressive behaviour, such as stalking or verbal threats. It also includes violence from a family or domestic relationship when this occurs at the workplace, including if the person's workplace is their home.

Workplace violence might come from your customers, clients, or people you work with like suppliers or members of the public, but it can also happen between workers, supervisors and managers. It may also happen away from the usual workplace but where work is being carried out, such as at a client's home or if a person's workplace is their home.

What do you need to do?

Violence and aggression can have significant short and long term impacts on a person's physical and psychological (mental) health. It's not just violent incidents like physical assault which can cause harm - being exposed to lower level but frequent forms of aggression, like yelling and name-calling, can also have a lasting effect on a person's health.

WHS laws require you to take care of the health and safety of your workers, including yourself, contractors, volunteers and other people like clients, customers and visitors at your workplace. You must treat the risk of violence and aggression just as you would any other workplace hazard. This means applying a risk management approach to eliminate or minimise risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

Managing risks involves:

- identifying how, where and when violence or aggressive behaviour might happen
- assessing the likelihood that a worker may experience violence or aggression and how it may affect them (e.g. their physical or mental health)
- implementing the most effective control measures to prevent it from happening, and working out how you will address it if it does happen
- checking that your controls are working and whether there is anything more you can do, and
- doing all of these things in consultation with your workers and any health and safety representatives if you have them.

Steps to prevent violence and aggression

As a small business, there are a number of steps you can take to manage the risk of violence and aggression and meet your WHS duties. Here are some ideas to help you start thinking about what you can reasonably do to prevent violence and aggression at your workplace.

- 1. Create a safe physical and online work environment.** Workplace violence is commonly committed by people such as customers, clients or members of the public, but it may also happen between workers. Making sure work areas are secure, have good natural surveillance and are well lit can help lower the risk of violence and how you can respond if it does happen. Avoid having furniture, partitions or walls which can restrict workers' movements and visibility. Consider separating workers from the public using screens or high counters, and if workers are working alone or at night consider security measures like security personnel, video surveillance, communication and alarm systems. People with a history of violence or aggressive behaviour should be banned from the workplace where you can. Consider the online working environment if relevant e.g. security settings, use of social media for work purposes and how workers, clients or customers interact online.
- 2. Implement safe work systems and procedures.** Manage the expectations of your customers or clients by clearly communicating the products or services you are providing. Avoid the need to handle a lot of cash or valuables, and workers working alone or outside of standard business hours. If your workers work at other places such as a client's house, train them in how to do a situational risk assessment, regularly check in with them throughout their shift and have processes to assess and manage client behaviours.
- 3. Create a positive and respectful workplace culture.** As an employer, it is your responsibility to set the behaviour standards that provide a safe workplace for all workers. You should foster a safe and respectful workplace culture where violence and aggression are not tolerated, and all matters can be discussed openly and routinely. Make sure everyone at the workplace understands what violence and aggression is and that it will not be tolerated, including from customers and clients.
- 4. Implement workplace policies.** A workplace policy may help set out how your business will prevent and respond to workplace violence. It should communicate to workers, customers, clients and visitors that your workplace has zero tolerance towards violence and aggression. This only needs to be a simple written policy which is communicated to all workers. It can set out the responsibilities of all workers (including supervisors and managers), the procedures for dealing with violent or aggressive incidents (both at the time of the incident and afterwards), how to report incidents and the support services available. You could display the workplace policy on notice boards, hand out brochures, put up posters or have informal discussions with workers to ensure they understand the policies.
- 5. Provide information and training.** Talk to your workers about where, when and how violence may happen at the workplace and what you're doing to prevent it. Train your workers in how to deal with difficult people, conflict resolution, when and how to escalate issues to senior workers, and how to report incidents. Everyone in the small business needs to understand the workplace policies and behaviours expected of them, so consider workers who may be from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Workers should also be told about support services available to them if they experience violence or aggression at the workplace.
- 6. Address violence within the workplace.** It is important to address inappropriate behaviour early. Regularly review workloads and time pressures, ensure workers have well-defined roles and provide training so workers can perform their role confidently and competently. New and young workers may need more support and supervision.
- 7. Encourage workers to report violence and aggression.** You should provide your workers with a range of ways to report incidents, such as informally, formally, anonymously or confidentially. Make sure workers know how to report violence or aggression and the support, protection and advice available to them. Small business owners and employers may nominate

themselves or a senior employee as a contact officer. This person should be provided with training or resources which can be obtained from employer organisations, small business and industry associations, or state and territory WHS regulators.

8. **Talk to your workers.** Workers and other people (such as other small business owners) may help you identify the hazards and risks that can lead to violence and aggression at the workplace and give you ideas about how to control them. You must take the views of workers into account when making decisions about health and safety matters and advise them of your decision.

In some circumstances, workers or their HSRs have the right to refuse to carry out or stop unsafe work. The risk must be serious and imminent. They must tell you as soon as possible and be available for other suitable work. See the Guide: [Preventing workplace violence and aggression](#) for further information.

Further information

Comprehensive information and more practical examples about how to manage the risk of workplace violence can be found in the Guide: [Preventing workplace violence and aggression](#).

- For advice on family and domestic violence, see the Information sheet: [Family and domestic violence at the workplace](#).
- For advice on safe cash handling procedures, see the Guide: [Transporting and handling cash](#).
- For advice on how to prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment and gendered violence, see the Guide: [Preventing workplace sexual harassment](#).
- For advice on workplace bullying, see the Guide: [Preventing and responding to workplace bullying](#).

Support services

Beyond Blue

www.beyondblue.org.au

1300 224 636

1800Respect

www.1800respect.org.au

1800 737 732

Our Watch

www.ourwatch.org.au

Sexual assault support services

www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/list-sexual-assault-services

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

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