

# *Safety* **NEWSLETTER**

## Managing the Threat of Aggression Towards County Workers

County employees frequently engage with members of the public while performing their daily work, and these engagements are not always friendly from the side of the public. Whether there is a zoning dispute, frustration about the noise caused by work being performed near someone's home, or an altered traffic route has enraged a driver, county workers are often faced with an additional task while on the job: deescalating a scene in which emotions are running high and patience is running low. While encounters with the public do not always turn hostile, it is important that workers are prepared to handle them appropriately to keep themselves and their coworkers safe.



## Identifying & Understanding the Risks

Although most of their interactions with the public remain civil, county workers must face the unfortunate reality that situations can quickly escalate out of control. It is therefore of the utmost importance that employees be aware of the various risks they may encounter, be able to recognize when a situation is escalating to a point of concern, and understand the factors that can increase their risk of harm.

There is a wide range of interactions with the public that can occur. Common encounters include raised voices or yelling, profanities and offensive gestures, threats, and physical violence; according to a special report from the Bureau of Statistics, government employees experienced workplace violence at a rate over five times that of the private sector. This report also revealed that one in five incidents of nonfatal workplace violence were committed against government workers over the course of the study. It is therefore important for county workers to understand two of the major contributing factors for this hostility.

### Environment

First, workers must be aware that many of their work environments are highly accessible to members of the public. Worksite visits, tasks in public areas such as parks or community areas, and emergency responses often leave county workers with limited physical barriers or a limited security presence. Government buildings are often intentionally designed to be open to the public, and the staff in these environments may become a tangible figure of authority to the members of the public even if that individual worker is not involved with the member of the public's dispute.

### Emotions

Second, county workers must be aware that they may come face-to-face with individuals who are emotionally charged and quick to react during these negative interactions with the public. Whether the situation involves an eviction, an arrest, or even an event that does not appear to be triggering from an outsider's perspective, county personnel must be able to identify when an individual is emotionally distressed and adjust their response to the situation accordingly.

## Implementing Practical Safety Strategies

Rather than waiting until a serious incident with a hostile member of the public occurs, county workers should implement strategies now that will prepare them for potential future encounters. Below are several strategies and tools that can be utilized to minimize the risks:

### Environmental Controls

- If an employee has a consistent work area, they should assess the layout of the area to determine whether there are any design changes that can be implemented to improve safety. Examples of possible changes include CCTV monitoring, limiting public access to areas that are designated for staff, and ensuring that all employees close & lock the doors behind them on a consistent basis. If an employee's work consists of fieldwork, they should implement a system for routine check-ins and work in pairs if they do not feel safe in an area.

### Training and Awareness

- With the risk of workplace violence five times that of the private sector, county workers should be trained on de-escalation techniques, recognizing the indicators of hostility, and understanding when they should step away from the encounter until they feel the situation is safe.
- Workers should also be trained in proper reporting procedures. By doing so, they can ensure that all threats and concerns for safety are documented. In turn, this documentation will provide a heads-up to other employees of the potential danger if their work involves the hostile individual or unsafe area.

### Incident Response Plan

- A key tool in keeping county workers as safe as possible in these situations is an incident response plan. These plans should address how to properly handle threats of violence as well as how to respond to an act of violence.
- These plans should also clearly identify what types of behavior are reportable, what individuals or authorities should be notified in the event of a threat or incident, and how the incidents will be addressed when they occur.

### Employee Support Post-Incident

- Whether it involved angry outbursts, threats of violence, or actual physical harm, any encounter with a hostile member of the public can have a significant impact on the county worker who was involved. It is important that each worker feels supported in the aftermath of the incident, and this support can take multiple forms. Workers may access employee assistance programs, take time off if necessary, and participate in a follow-up discussion with their team to review the incident and identify how future incidents can be prevented.

## A Culture of Awareness

Hostile members of the public are an unpredictable threat that poses a risk to county employees, and it is important that teams follow an all-hands-on-deck approach and work together to mitigate the risk as much as possible.

Creating a culture of awareness, preparation, and support is the key to risk management. When teams take the time to invest in their safety today, they will reap the benefits in the future if a volatile situation unfolds.



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