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Workplace violence: What compliance professionals should know about the unthinkable

by Amy S. Garner

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According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), approximately 75% of nearly 25,000 workplace assaults reported annually occurred in healthcare and social service settings.^[1] Workers in healthcare are four times more likely to be victimized than workers in private industry.^[2] Although these numbers are staggering, even more frightening is the fact that most incidents of verbal or physical abuse are not reported by healthcare workers.

Healthcare organizations across the country are making the prevention of workplace violence incidents a top priority. Numerous resources are available to aid organizations in their proactive efforts to train staff, make sure policies and procedures are in place, and assess environmental security. For example, the American Society for Health Care Risk Management has published a workplace violence toolkit to aid in assessing the proactive steps to take to prevent patient-to-staff violence as well as visitor/family-to-staff violence and even staff-to-staff violence.^[3]

The Joint Commission also published a Sentinel Event Alert in April 2018 dedicated to physical and verbal violence against health care workers.^[4] There are numerous resources available from OSHA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Crisis Prevention Institute.

It is important to be proactive and train staff on the steps of de-escalation, self-defense, and on what to do when someone is wielding a deadly weapon, but what do hospitals do when the unthinkable happens? What do you, as a compliance or privacy officer, need to be prepared for after the initial incident is over? Chances are the compliance and privacy officer will be involved in both internal and external investigations. This article describes a few of the regulatory agency considerations that hospital compliance and privacy officers should be aware of in the course of investigating or managing the activities immediately following incidents of workplace violence.

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