



Threat Assessment and
Management Associates Inc.
Workplace Violence Specialist

1 New anti-violence rules to govern workplace

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Worst danger often posed by fellow workers, says expert

By Mike Dempster

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Alberta businesses will soon have to take formal steps to protect their employees from workplace violence.

Legislation contained in the new Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and Code will likely become law at the end of September, though companies will effectively have until April 1, 2004 to comply.

And while it's always been a "general duty" of companies to protect their employees, this is the first time in Alberta that employers will have specified guidelines to follow.

As part of the regulation, employers must establish policies and procedures; complete a risk/hazard assessment; and develop procedures for reporting, investigating, documenting and tracking violent behaviour.

"We want employers to recognize that violence is a workplace hazard, just as they'd recognize the need for protection from exposure to chemicals," says Yan Lau, acting manager for legislation, policy and standards in the Workplace Health and Safety area.

"The code will affect employers differently," he adds. "Some bigger companies will have binders full (of policy and procedures), while a small operation might have a couple of pages."

The intent, stresses Lau, is to create awareness within companies, and develop a standard method of dealing with the issue.

The inclusion of workplace violence legislation is part of a full review of OHS regulations undertaken by a task force of labour, industry and government stakeholders.

The process began almost three years ago, and an overview and specific guidelines can be found on the government's website (www3.gov.ab.ca/hre/whs).

The new violence guidelines are based on legislation in Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

While it's easy to regard workplace violence in narrow and tragic terms – such as highly publicized murders committed at local convenience stores, which sparked the Work Alone legislation – it's a much broader subject.

"There are a lot of nuances that go on with workplace violence," says Heather Gray, an Edmonton-based consultant who specializes in workplace violence and threat assessment.

She explains that violence can manifest itself in many ways: an employee who may be having issues at work and lashes out; difficult terminations; stalking issues; bullying; harassment; and toxic work groups.

Heather Gray

As described by the new code: "Violence means the attempted, threatened, or actual conduct of a person that causes or is likely to cause physical injury."

The guidelines note that violence can seriously compromise the workplace by causing injury, creating emotional distress and reducing productivity and morale.

Under the new regulations, at a minimum, policies and procedures must be stated that are clear and affirm that violence is not acceptable. Employees must feel that they can register a complaint knowing that it will be dealt with in confidence and without fear of recrimination.

With clarity, employees are more likely to cope better and report problems, especially if the alleged offender is in a position of authority, the guidelines state.

Companies will be monitored for compliance through the normal safety-inspection process, by following up complaints and by identifying problem companies through records such as WCB lost-time claims.

In Western Canada, Gray has been a pioneer in dealing with workplace risks and assessments. Her company, Threat Assessment and Management Associates Inc. (TAMA Inc.), has been tracking progress at OHS and her website (www.tamainc.net) offers updates and advice for companies on the subject.



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“Often when I talk to companies or business leaders about workplace violence, they say it doesn’t exist in their organization,” she says. “They think of the high-profile events they see on TV. But then they start to tell me about the incidents they’ve had and, all of a sudden, they realize it is a problem.”

Typically, the worst danger in the workplace comes from the relationship with a fellow employee, not an outside agency such as a customer or criminal, says Gray.

As part of the guidelines, employers must do a complete audit of their daily procedures.

Though it seems daunting, employers can effectively gather information by sending a questionnaire to all employees for feedback on where they feel risks exist. That helps pinpoint whether a threat exists with co-workers; dealing with customers; access that outsiders have to the workplace; or whether they transport cash or goods that might put the employee at risk.

It’s important for employers to survey employees, but Gray believes it’s prudent that experts analyse that information and then help to develop strategies.

She also contends that forward- looking companies will recognize that violence is an important issue, and gain from that knowledge.

“Initially I think that when the law comes into effect, businesses will do the minimum as far as implementing the guidelines.

“But eventually some will go beyond the minimum. In training sessions that I’ve done with companies, they enhance their programs because they want to empower their employees to manage their communications, to do well in the training, and come away with skills so they don’t have issues.”

Gray adds that companies want their middle managers to have comprehensive training so they can manage subordinates who can reduce conflict, as well as an overall program where every employee can recognize problems.

“They are reducing the potential for violence,” she says. “That’s what I like to see.”