

# Contain Workplace Violence by Planning Ahead

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SAN DIEGO — There is no one technique or strategy that will protect you from the risk of physical attacks in your workplace by patients or coworkers, Donna Pence declared at a conference sponsored by the Chadwick Center for Children and Families at Children's Hospital and Health Center, San Diego.

"There is nothing about who and what you are that makes you immune from people intent on doing bad things," said Ms. Pence, training coordinator for San Diego State University's Public Child Welfare Training Academy. "Not looks, not money,

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not profession, not uniform, not where you live, not how religious you are, or how good you are."

The best self-protection involves a combination of factors, including being aware of your capabilities, your environment, your habits, realistic hazards, and your options should a violent episode occur. She offered the following tips:

► **Do some self-reflection.** What is your history of violence and anger and your response to it? Have you been in situations where you felt threatened, and now you feel hypervigilant? Your personal history of violence "will affect your response to situations," said Ms. Pence, who spent 25 years as a special agent with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. "It will impact the lens through which you view [someone's] behavior. That can be good, but it also could lead you to jump the gun and have a perception of violence and danger when it doesn't really exist."

► **Make an effort to understand your colleague's attitudes about personal safety and anger in the workplace.** Are you allowed to talk about it? Are you encouraged to talk about it? "Is there a forum where you can ventilate about any anxieties you have about a client, or any anger you may have toward the client?" she asked. "Because if you're angry and they're angry, that's not a real healthy combination."

Also, ask yourself, are there people in the office who can hear you if you yell for help? Is there an emergency buzzer nearby? If somebody enters the office and a buzzer goes off, do we have a plan on what to do?

► **Think twice before visiting a patient in his or her home.** Look at prior referrals. Consult with social workers or other physicians to see if the patient has a history of violent behavior. "If I have somebody who's been arrested for drugs, weapons, domestic violence, or child abuse, I'm going to think twice before going out to their turf by myself," she said.

To protect against workplace violence and abuse, Ms. Pence recommended working on "target hardening." Target hardening is a military term that refers to the notion that you are the person you are trying to make most safe.

"Until you recognize your personal, physical, mental, and environmental vulnerabilities and the possibility of victimization and do what you can realistically to reduce these, you're not a hard target," she explained. This means:

- **You must be aware.**
- **You must think in a different way.** For

example, "Don't walk down a sidewalk that has doors on one side and bushes on the other." Also, when you approach a parking lot, don't skirt the edge of it. Rather, "walk toward the middle of the parking lot and look to the left and right."

► **You must act in a different way.** "The way you walk, look, and carry yourself makes a difference in the degree of vulnerability that is ascribed to you by someone looking to attack," she said. "Look confident, look aware, and be in the present."

► **You must recognize your personal vulnerabilities.** Ask yourself, how could I defend myself in the event of a personal attack? "For example, I'm not a long distance runner," Ms. Pence said. "I don't aspire to be a runner. That's a realistic assessment of my physical abilities. If there are areas where you have a deficit, ask, what can I do to enhance my abilities? Maybe it's learning some form of self-protection or learning verbal de-escalation techniques." ■

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