



Workplace Violence

Nothing arouses passions in Texas more than water. As the old saying goes “whiskey is for drinkin’; water is for fightin’”. In the broad scope of things, the fights over water usually take place in courts or the legislature. Water rights, water availability, access to water, wasting water, and conserving water all can elicit vigorous and even violent responses. Sometimes a few of these fights make it to the local water district level but usually in board hearings about regulations or board actions like bid awards, permit applications, or eminent domain. These actions rarely result in real violence except, perhaps, verbally. However, water districts and authorities in Texas are not immune to workplace violence that can result in verbal abuse and physical attack.

When we consider workplace violence, we sometimes focus on the incidents of disgruntled workers going on a shooting spree on the job and killing and wounding bosses and co-workers. Certainly, that risk exists in almost any workplace, but it is very rare. What is not so rare are the instances of verbal abuse, bullying, and physical assault. Some of these instances at the district level are reported and work their way through a human resources process, while others are ignored or dealt with by supervisors or co-workers. Either way, abuse or assault can have a detrimental effect on employee performance and morale.

What are the causes of workplace violence? Many incidents of violence in the workplace are brought into the workplace by members of the public who have a disagreement with the district or employees of the district. Pretty serious encounters have occurred when district employees were exercising access to district easements that crossed a landowner’s property. The landowner considered them to be trespassing and threatened them with a shotgun. The employees left rather than continue the confrontation and called the sheriff. Contentious moments have also occurred during board meetings and hearings about permits. Denial or revocation of permits can have a perceived disastrous effect on the permit holder that they may think threatens their livelihood. Board meetings can also devolve into difficulties when current members don’t want to give way to newly elected or appointed members. Fortunately, these examples are very rare but no less serious.

Other examples of workplace violence can occur when arguments arise, and verbal abuse ensues. This is a problem when it involves two employees or an employee and their supervisor. Disputes of this kind usually involve adverse working conditions, how to do a job, perceived violations of safety rules, bullying, and personal arguments brought into the workplace. An event of this type is one that has the potential to become a more serious expression of violence if there is an employment action or the perception of retaliation or discrimination. Any employment action arising from an instance of abuse or violence should receive careful handling within the district. Consistent and thorough

documentation is extremely important. Consultation with counsel should take place before any termination or disciplinary action. Security precautions in the event of termination may also be necessary especially if threats have been made or there is a history of past violence. Make sure you revoke key cards, change entry codes, and lock computer logins to limit access by terminated employees.

Interpersonal conflicts can be reduced and managed with good safety and other workplace rules that are in writing, endorsed by top management, and consistently and fairly enforced. Any enforcement or disciplinary action should be fair to the violator and perceived to be fair by co-workers.

Just as in school shootings, when there is social media or fellow student awareness of a shooter's intent, the workplace could have knowledge of potential violence. Social media sources, as well as overhearing conversations, or observing behavior, could provide clues of impending aggression. Encourage workers to report this kind of observation to supervisors or managers.

Workplace violence can also occur when someone with criminal intent walks through the district's door. This is how most active shooter incidents begin that are not related to employee revenge actions. Sometimes targets of violence are chosen for a specific reason and sometimes they're just targets of convenience. If the district becomes a target, there might be clues beforehand as mentioned above or in prior relations with angry or disgruntled people who have had business with the district. This can include people who have been denied permits, an interpersonal relationship, or family members of employees who have been let go or disciplined somehow. Again, threats made out in the community or to district employees may provide some warning.

If an active shooter event begins, the proper response is to run, hide, or fight, in that order of priority. Running away from the shooter keeps the employee safer and could help delay the shooter as they actively look for targets. Each person in the workplace should know the quickest route to escape the workplace. Windows should also be considered along with any other available exit if a preferred route is unavailable. Hiding is the second option if running is foreclosed by the presence of the shooter. Some staff members in offices can lock their doors, shut any blinds in windows into the office, turn out the lights, barricade the door with heavy furniture or file cabinets, silence phones and remain silent. Hiding effectively also delays the shooter, providing more time for law enforcement to intervene. For other staff, who do not have offices and work in cubicles or shop areas, a safe hiding place should be identified that can be locked and barricaded. These places should be documented and designated in emergency action plans for active shooter response. Active shooter drills, just like fire drills, can help train employees in the best routes for escape and the best places to hide.

The last resort of fighting to save your own life is primarily a mental commitment to do whatever can be done to prevent being killed or wounded. Resistance to a shooter also creates delay and can save lives and give time for law enforcement to deal with the threat. Of course, the encounter can be deadly, so the mental commitment is important. The

district should conduct active shooter drills, emergency planning, and training for its staff that addresses all three phases of the response to an active shooter.

The best response to an active shooter is prevention. Awareness of threats made to employees, prior violent or abusive behavior, social media postings, and what people have heard during the workday can be important in alerting management to an impending threat. Other than that, the best way to prevent an active shooter is to keep them out of district facilities. Secure doors do this. Card swipe access, entry codes, and locked doors can prevent unauthorized access. Open areas like shops and equipment storage are harder to secure but doors from the shop into the offices can be secured. Employees can access with their key cards or entry codes. Camera systems with over watch at entries can also provide warning of unauthorized visitors. Entry can be permitted with a buzz-in lock or intercom communications with the reception staff. This is particularly important in isolated locations or where there are only a small number of people on duty.

Fund Loss Control Consultants can help you with Active Shooter Training and consultation about emergency plans and district security. Please call on us and your local law enforcement services for help with the vital issues raised by workplace violence.