

Occupational violence

What is the problem?

Occupational violence has been associated with injuries to workers within the disability services industry.

Occupational violence is defined as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work.

Examples of occupational violence include verbal, physical and psychological abuse, intimidation, punching, scratching, biting, grabbing, pushing and throwing objects. Occupational violence is defined without consideration of intent (eg where a person may not be able to form intent but is capable of violence).

Disability services employees work in varied locations and with people with a diverse range of disabilities and needs. Violent or aggressive behaviour can be one of many behaviours that need to be managed constructively. Understanding and respecting the person with a disability improves their quality of life and also minimises risk.

What are the risks?

Workers may be at risk of musculoskeletal injuries due to physical violence from people with disabilities and/or their families/friends.

Psychological stress is also a risk in cases of verbal abuse, threats, aggression and the anticipation of violence.

Psychological risks can be a result of cumulative stress resulting from a number of seemingly inconsequential acts.

The common sources of risk for occupational violence include:

- working with people who are in distress, bored, frustrated or have difficulty communicating their needs
- working alone or in isolation
- having insufficient or no information, training or supervision about an individual's needs and behaviours (eg case history, known triggers for aggression, care preferences, case management plan)
- working in locations with poor lighting or design (eg limited access and exit points).

The nature and location of work, types of clients, staffing levels and skill mix can all affect the risk of exposure to occupational violence. These risks should be addressed at the earliest possible stage of assessment of the person with a disability, prior to any placement and/or service delivery and reviewed regularly during service delivery. Any situation where there is potential for harm to workers should be addressed.

What are solutions to the problem?

Prevention and management of occupational violence requires a multi-faceted organisational approach. Consultation with workers, other service providers, people with a disability and their families is essential for effective risk management.

The risk of injury to workers can be eliminated or reduced by the following safety measures:

- changes to the workplace (eg improved physical layout, noise reduction)
- systems of work such as review of workplace practices and staffing levels/skills
- systems that assist in the:
 - development and implementation of behaviour support strategies
 - regular review and modification if required of behaviour support strategies.
- assuming the highest level of risk where no or limited information is available about the person or situation prior to service provision, and implementing appropriate controls (eg having two workers present at initial contact)
- having a communication system in place for each client with:
 - full, accurate and up-to-date information about client from referring party
 - initial entry assessment, including risk of occupational violence, done by a suitably qualified person
 - consultation with family, friends and other people who can provide relevant information.

A Health and Safety Solution

- reviewing incident reporting to identify possible triggers/situations
- using a risk assessment checklist that addresses the following:
 - How likely is it that an act of violence will occur?
 - How severe would the impact of such an act be?
 - Is there any information regarding previous incidents of violent or aggressive behaviour by an individual, including possible triggers, frequency and control measures?
 - Are the control measures adequate and how can they be improved?
- providing personal protective equipment that can be used by the worker if occupational violence occurs (eg personal duress alarms or mobile phones)
- providing appropriate information and training on:
 - risk factors associated with occupational violence
 - motivation for aggression/violence
 - signs of impending violence
 - prevention measures in place to control risk
 - workplace policy and procedures including emergency and post incident responses
 - communication strategies and skills
 - positive interventions
 - assessment of behavioural risk
 - conflict management and de-escalation skills.
- increasing knowledge and awareness of the impact of environment and design.

Further Information

WorkSafe Advisory Service

Toll-free 1800 136 089

Email info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

worksafe.vic.gov.au

Related WorkSafe Health and Safety Solutions

- *Moving and supporting people with a disability*
- *Supporting people with personal hygiene care*
- *Assisting people in wheelchairs*
- *Handling wheelchairs in and out of vehicles*
- *Moving/lifting objects*
- *Vacuuming*
- *Mopping*
- *Cleaning bathrooms*
- *Making beds*
- *Work related driving: Transporting people and moving equipment*

Related WorkSafe publications

- *Prevention of occupational violence*
- *Prevention and management of aggression in health services*
- *Working safely in community services*
- *Working safely in visiting health services*

Other related publications

- *Department of Human Services, Code of Practice for the prevention and management of occupational violence in disability services*
- Available from

worksafe.vic.gov.au and health.vic.gov.au