Healing the Healers: Preventing Workplace Violence in Health Care Settings

By Nathaniel M. Glasser & Katie Smith on April 26, 2018

On April 17, the Joint Commission—a nonprofit organization that provides accreditations to health care organizations—issued a list of seven steps hospitals should take to improve safety and reduce the risk of workplace violence perpetrated by employees, patients, and visitors. While the seven steps are advisory rather than mandatory, health care organizations risk jeopardizing their accreditation status if they fail to take appropriate action in response to episodes of workplace violence.

The Joint Commission’s alert seeks to address what it characterizes as the prevalence of workplace violence in the health care industry, citing a 2015 report from the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) suggesting that approximately 75% of workplace assaults reported annually occur in health care and social service. The Joint Commission suggests that health care workplaces are particularly susceptible to workplace violence because of the daily care of patients dealing with mental health issues.

In the last few years, OSHA has taken action to address workplace violence in health care settings, including by overhauling its Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Healthcare and Social Service Workers, and by issuing citations to health care employers with allegedly inadequate workplace violence programs. Yet OSHA has not proposed an explicit regulation applicable to workplace violence in health care and instead has relied upon the General Duty Clause when issuing citations. And as our colleagues have reported, as of April 1, 2018, California is the only state that expressly requires all health care facilities to maintain a comprehensive plan to prevent workplace violence. The Joint Commission’s recent alert now adds additional incentives for health care organizations to implement and update workplace violence prevention programs.

So what can health care organizations do to protect the workers who put themselves in harm’s way each day? According to the Joint Commission, organizations should clearly define the term “workplace violence.” Staff members should recognize that workplace violence comprises a broad range of behaviors, from verbal assaults to physical violence with or without use of weapons. Staff should be able to easily report episodes of workplace violence, and organizations should track and follow up on any reported incidents, providing support and psychological counseling to victims, witnesses, and others affected.

Once organizations begin tracking incidents, they should review and analyze the data to identify common contributing factors and use those to develop intervention strategies. These strategies may include changes to the physical environment, such as altering exit routes, improving alarm
systems, adding restricted access doors, and implementing more regular security patrols, or altering work practices or administrative procedures, reducing stressors like crowding and wait times, identified as risk factors for workplace violence. Organizations should train employees on how to use de-escalation tactics, and run practice drills such as active shooter response simulations. Finally, organizations should regularly review and assess the effectiveness of their responsive strategies to recognize areas of success and ensure continuous improvement.

While these measures are unlikely to completely eliminate workplace violence in health care settings, they represent a step in the right direction toward managing the risks, thus enabling our health care workforce to focus on the business of healing. Health care employers are well-advised to consult with counsel to develop and implement effective workplace violence prevention programs to improve employee safety and morale, reduce the likelihood of receiving an OSHA citation or jeopardizing accreditation, and – in the case of California employers – comply with the law.

SOURCE: https://www.healthemploymentandlabor.com/