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APTA Security Emergency
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Transit Infrastructure and Systems
Security Working Group

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

Abstract: This recommended practice provides a framework for transit agencies to prevent, respond to, and recover from workplace violence incidents.

Keywords: assault, employee assistance program (EAP), investigation, preparedness, prevention, reporting, response, recovery, threat, training, workplace violence

Summary: This recommended practice instructs transit agencies to establish workplace violence preparedness programs and teams to ensure that their organizations are adequately equipped to manage prevention, response and recovery activities. Prevention activities focus on awareness and de-escalation training, as well as the implementation of preventive security measures. Response activities include detailing plans, policies and procedures for reporting, investigating and addressing workplace violence in a transit environment. Recovery includes post-incident support, such as impact assessments, EAPs, and risk assessment considerations.



Foreword

The American Public Transportation Association is a standards development organization in North America. The process of developing standards is managed by the APTA Standards Program's Standards Development Oversight Council (SDOC). These activities are carried out through several standards policy and planning committees that have been established to address specific transportation modes, safety and security requirements, interoperability, and other topics.

APTA used a consensus-based process to develop this document and its continued maintenance, which is detailed in the [manual for the APTA Standards Program](#). This document was drafted in accordance with the approval criteria and editorial policy as described. Any trade name used in this document is information given for the convenience of users and does not constitute an endorsement.

This document was prepared by the APTA Security Emergency Management Working Group and the Transit Infrastructure and Systems Security Working Group, as directed by the Security Standards Policy and Planning Committee.

This document represents a common viewpoint of those parties concerned with its provisions, namely transit operating/planning agencies, manufacturers, consultants, engineers and general interest groups. The application of any recommended practices or guidelines contained herein is voluntary. APTA standards are mandatory to the extent incorporated by an applicable statute or regulation. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a transit system's operations. In cases where there is a conflict or contradiction between an applicable law or regulation and this document, consult with a legal adviser to determine which document takes precedence.

This is a new document.



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Participants

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Introduction

This introduction is not part of APTA SS-ISS-RP-005-23, “Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs.”

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

- individuals or organizations that operate rail transit systems;
- individuals or organizations that contract with others for the operation of rail transit systems; and
- individuals or organizations that influence how rail transit systems are operated (including but not limited to consultants, designers and contractors).

Scope and purpose

This document identifies procedures for preventing, responding to and recovering from workplace violence incidents. APTA recommends the use of this recommended practice by public transportation providers. This recommended practice is not intended to be the authoritative source for workplace violence considerations, as each agency will have its own specific attributes, risk profile, budget and legal restrictions, among other unique characteristics. APTA defines workplace violence in alignment with the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

1. Overview

Workplace violence is a significant threat to the public transportation industry, and recent events indicate that the frequency and severity of these incidents has increased over time. Transportation operators should never tolerate any act or threat of violence. For the safety of their employees, passengers and property, it is critical that transit agencies adequately prepare for workplace violence incidents.

The definition of workplace violence varies across federal agencies, regulatory offices, nonprofits and private organizations. For example, the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) and the National Transit Institute (NTI) define workplace violence as “the act or threat of violence, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults directed towards persons at work or on duty.” Meanwhile, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) defines workplace violence as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening, disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.”

For the purposes of this document, APTA adopts the broadest definition of workplace violence in alignment with the American Society for Industrial Security (ASIS) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). ASIS and SHRM define workplace violence as:

A spectrum of behaviors—including overt acts of violence, threats and other conduct—that generates a reasonable concern for safety from violence, where a nexus exists between the behavior and the physical safety of employees and others (such as customers, clients and business associates) on-site or off-site when related to the organization.

This document intends to highlight transit-specific considerations for workplace violence prevention, response and recovery, where applicable, but will also discuss general approaches and policies that may apply across various industries and workplaces. Prevention activities focus on training and preventive security measures; response activities include detailing procedures for reporting, investigating and addressing these events; and recovery includes post-incident activities for affected personnel, as well as risk and impact assessment considerations.

This recommended practice is scoped to focus on violence that occurs while on duty, on transit property and/or with a clear nexus to the workplace in which transit employees and/or contractors are on the receiving end.

1.1 Workplace violence programs

Transit agencies should develop and implement workplace violence programs composed of personnel specifically responsible for developing, monitoring and enforcing workplace violence policies. Personnel should be adequately trained to meet these responsibilities and be granted the authority and resources to complete the job effectively.

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

Workplace violence programs should be staffed by a flexible and interdisciplinary workplace violence team. When developing these teams, transit agencies should consider inviting representatives from the following functional areas, within the bounds of funding and available resources:

- **Security/law enforcement:** Incident response and physical security
- **Safety:** First aid and emergency medical care
- **Legal:** Legality determinations and case representation
- **Human resources:** Agency rules, regulations and administrative actions
- **Employee assistance/relations:** Pre- and post-incident employee support (e.g., counseling and treatment referrals)
- **Communications:** Public affairs and incident notifications

These representatives can be in-house resources or external organizations. They may be called upon to provide their expertise on a number of subjects, including policy development, threat assessments, report investigations and incident response, as applicable.

Members of the workplace violence team may also find it useful to include representation from additional functional areas, including agency leadership; management; equal opportunity advocates; diversity, equity and inclusion teams; contracting; and more. Transit agencies are encouraged to determine which functional groups are the best fit for their workplace violence teams and agencies overall.

2. Preventing workplace violence

As employers, transit agencies have a legal and ethical obligation to their employees and contractors to provide for a safe working environment. Additionally, per 49 CFR Part 673, Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan requirements necessitate establishing a risk reduction program that includes mitigation of assaults on transit workers.

While no organization can guarantee absolute protection from harm, transit agencies can reduce the likelihood of injury or loss of life through comprehensive workplace violence prevention programs. These programs provide a forum for the agency to develop proactive policies, implement security measures, and educate workers on prevention-related activities and topics.

2.1 Organizational culture and policies

Transit agencies should demonstrate their commitment to maintaining a safe environment by promoting a violence-free workplace culture where employees and contractors feel safe to perform their jobs. All verbal commitments by the organization should be backed by written policies that expressly prohibit workplace violence in all its forms, including threats, harassment, intimidation and injury. When developing these policies, transit agencies should include the following:

- a definition for and concrete examples of workplace violence
- a description of prohibited activities and/or weapons
- consequences of violating the policy (e.g., disciplinary action, termination)
- instructions for reporting workplace violence incidents or other concerning behaviors
- a process for collecting, investigating and responding to reports
- training expectations for employees and contractors
- employee assistance resources and other support services

Transit agencies should consider workplace violence when developing other organizational policies, such as those pertaining to sexual harassment, terminations, performance reviews and other circumstances that may serve as “trigger” events for violence.

Transit agencies should collaborate with legal counsel to ensure that all policies comply with federal, state and local laws regarding privacy protections, background investigations, anti-discrimination and weapons laws, among other topics. Policy should clearly state all applicable regulatory requirements and undergo review on a regular basis (e.g., annually).

2.2 Security measures

In conjunction with organizational policies, transit agencies should conduct systemwide and facility-specific risk assessments to identify potential vulnerabilities that a perpetrator may exploit during a workplace violence incident.¹ Transit agencies should use the outcomes of these assessments, which should include both insider and outsider threats, to identify new and confirm existing security measures.

Transit agencies should consider multiple layers of interdependent measures to protect employees and contractors during workplace violence incidents and other significant security events. Measures may span various functional areas that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- surveillance
- protective barriers
- crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)²
- security and law enforcement
- screening and access control
- moving targeted employee to an alternate facility or work assignment

Some measures may not be practical in open transit environments. Refer to APTA’s suite of security and emergency management standards for more information.

Transit agencies should also consider reviewing and implementing administrative security measures. For example, transit agencies should conduct thorough background investigations, to include criminal histories and professional references, on prospective employees to reduce worker-on-worker violence.³ Transit agencies could also consider instituting drug and alcohol testing for prospective and/or existing employees.

2.3 Awareness training

It is the responsibility of the transit agency to communicate its workplace violence prevention plan and educate employees and contractors on organizational policies, security measures, and reporting and response expectations. Transit agencies should provide workplace violence training to employees and contractors at all levels of the organization, from front-line workers to supervisors to executives. Training should not be dependent on tenure; new and existing employees alike should participate.

Transit agencies should conduct workplace violence-related training at least annually to reinforce the organization’s stance against violence and ensure that employees and contractors remain informed about the topic. Regular training also instills employees with the confidence and knowledge to take quick and decisive action during a workplace violence incident.

1. See APTA SS-SIS-S-017-21, “Security Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Transit.”

2. See APTA SS-SIS-RP-007-10, “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) for Transit Facilities.”

3. See APTA-SS-SRM-RP-004-11, “Conducting Background Investigations.”

Training topics may include:

- definition for workplace violence and what it constitutes
- an overview of the agency’s workplace violence prevention program
- an overview of all safety and security policies at the agency
- specific risk factors for violence in the transit environment and at agency facilities
- warning signs of workplace violence, including direct and indirect threats and harassment
- active shooter preparedness and response training
- procedures for reporting potential or ongoing workplace violence, emphasizing confidentiality
- procedures for investigating reports
- methods and resources employees can leverage to protect themselves
- methods to de-escalate volatile situations
- employee assistance resources
- lessons learned from previous workplace violence incidents

Transit agencies are encouraged to identify additional training topics aligned to their particular workplaces. For example, transit agencies could consider familiarization training to acquaint first responders, emergency medical care providers and security/law enforcement with agency plans and blueprints.

In conjunction with training, transit agencies may also opt to assess prevention, protection and response procedures in an exercise environment.⁴

3. Responding to workplace violence

3.1 Reporting procedures

There are no situations in which workplace violence is acceptable, and employees must have a clear process for reporting active or perceived threats against themselves or other employees as soon as possible. The agency’s employment manual should define the process, stress reporting through the supervisory chain and specify if reports can be made anonymously. The process must clearly define the actions and reporting necessary by each level of supervision. Supervisors and managers have an obligation to deal with inappropriate behavior that employees may encounter and must take all threats seriously. The process must define the documentation necessary to report a threat or incident. If the threat is within the supervisory chain, an alternate process should be defined. Encourage non-anonymous reporting by instilling confidence in employees that no retaliation will be taken for reporting workplace violence. Reporting procedures should also include any regulatory notifications and identify who in the agency is responsible for that communication.

For immediate threats of physical harm, employees should call 911. Employees may also call in-house security, if that resource is applicable. Incident reports need to be made within the agency for all workplace violence threats and incidents. Although police reports could be made if 911 was notified, a police report will not suffice for an agency investigation. Incident reports should be in a consistent format in each agency. Incident reports need to include incident details (e.g., time, date, location, incident narrative) and a list of witnesses. Witnesses will need to be interviewed as detailed below.

The agency should maintain thorough internal documentation, including the outcome of report investigations.

4. See APTA-SS-SEM-S-004-09, “Transit Exercises.”

3.2 Investigating reports

3.2.1 Team-based approach

The agency should have an interdisciplinary team that coordinates investigations and actions taken in response to reports of workplace violence or allegations of violations of the workplace violence policy. The team is typically composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds to ensure that information is shared and responses are evaluated from multiple disciplines. Typically, teams include employees from security, transit police, human resources, operations, communications, legal, and the employee assistance program (EAP). Teams may be big or small, scaled to fit the organization. The team is typically led by security personnel. The team should receive training on workplace violence, including how to thoroughly investigate and respond to incidents.

3.2.2 Initial triage

When a member of the team receives an incident report, an initial triage should occur to determine if it should be immediately escalated to the full team. Examples of reports that should be immediately escalated to the full team include someone threatening to kill one or more people, a domestic violence victim leaving their abuser, someone attempting to kill or harm themselves, or acts of violence against an employee. Incidents that are less severe in nature may be investigated more fully before involving the full team.

3.2.3 Scope of investigations

All incidents, including anonymous reports, should be fully investigated, and the confidentiality of the investigation/reporting party should be protected whenever reasonably possible. Incidents should typically be investigated by security, HR or another trained investigator. Incidents involving allegations against executives or organizational leadership may require investigation by outside legal counsel, risk management and/or workplace violence consultants.

3.3 Taking action

3.3.1 Initial triage for immediate life or safety issues

The organization should initiate triage reports of workplace violence incidents to ensure that immediate action is taken in the event of a direct threat. Signs of a direct threat include behaviors such as fighting, destruction of property, threats to kill/harm self or others, displaying or threatening to display a weapon, and any person who is out of control and poses an immediate danger.

In the event of a direct threat, security and/or law enforcement personnel should respond. If an employee is the one causing a direct threat, they should be put on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation. Incidents that are indirect threats caused by an employee may be investigated without placing the employee on paid administrative leave and without involving law enforcement or uniformed security personnel. Examples of indirect threats include someone reporting a restraining order that protects them while at work, an employee appearing to have a preoccupation with incidents of violence, or an employee seeming to become angered easily or demonstrating a dramatic shift in mood.

Initial triage is not a one-size-fits-all approach. A transit agency may consider putting employees on paid administrative leave even if they did not commit a direct threat.

3.3.2 EAPs and mental health support

EAPs are confidential and voluntary work-based programs that offer employees free and confidential assessments, short-term counseling, referrals and follow-up services when they may have personal and/or

work-related problems.⁵ EAPs address a broad and complex range of issues affecting mental health and well-being. Though EAPs are not specifically focused on workplace violence, they can be activated to address workplace violence.

Individuals may often benefit from EAP and mental health support to help deal with life challenges. By helping people manage life challenges early, a transit agency may mitigate future acts of violence. As such, referring employees to EAP and mental health support is an extremely vital component of taking action against workplace violence. Agencies should consult their legal counsel before considering any fitness-for-duty examinations as part of an EAP/mental health support program. Outcomes from fitness-for-duty examinations may limit the options agencies can use to manage an incident due to federal ADA laws.

3.3.3 Discipline and separation

The agency should not have a one-size-fits-all approach to workplace violence–related discipline and separation; however, there should be a clear policy on how the organization will approach its decision-making. When considering discipline/separation actions, a transit agency should tailor its response to the specific case, the severity or frequency of the violation, and the amount of risk posed to the organization.

For some incidents, it will be clear that separation is the best course of action. Minor incidents, though, may require additional consideration. For example, if an employee is found to have committed an act of workplace violence that is determined to be minor and not grounds for separation, then the agency may choose to discipline the employee in a manner that plainly articulates that their behavior is unacceptable. However, if a minor incident is still grounds for separation, then the agency can apply termination softeners. Example termination softeners include a neutral reference, continuing to pay for medical/COBRA insurance, continuing to provide EAP, assisting with job-finding services, etc.

3.4 Communication

Before communicating incident details outside the workplace violence program team, transit agencies should consider the residual impact on others at the organization and the public. Agencies may have a crisis communication plan to assist in determining the types of events that require communication and identifying who needs to receive that notification. The agency should consider victim consent and confidentiality when making these decisions.

In most situations, there will be multiple levels or groups requiring communication, and messages must be adjusted, yet consistent, for each target group. Although transparency is important, not all stakeholders need to know about every incident or to the same level of detail. Targeting information to specific groups also prevents overwhelming personnel with information. If irrelevant information is regularly disseminated, employees may begin to treat all notifications as irrelevant.

In all situations, communications must be timely, clear, easy to understand, accurate and consistent. Timely communication is crucial, and employees should hear information from the agency before word-of-mouth misinformation. Consideration should be made in the communication plan on how critical information is passed to front-line personnel who may not have access to the same technology as administrative personnel.

When incidents have drawn or may draw public attention, the agency should have a well-established relationship with local media outlets to provide relevant information to the public.

5. <https://www.opm.gov/faqs/QA.aspx?fid=4313c618-a96e-4c8e-b078-1f76912a10d9&pid=2c2b1e5b-6ff1-4940-b478-34039a1e1174>

The flow of communication and the crisis communication plan, if the agency has one, should be evaluated before an incident occurs (e.g., annually) and should be reviewed and updated on any lessons learned after plan activation.

4. Recovering from workplace violence

4.1 Impact assessment

Responsibilities around workplace violence do not end with response. Recovering from and determining the effect of workplace violence is also crucial to a successful program. When assessing the impact of workplace violence, transit agencies need to consider impacts to service delivery in addition to the broader impact to people, property and reputation, as applicable.

The immediate and acute impact is, of course, to the employee(s) experiencing workplace violence. Transit agencies should lead with understanding how workplace violence impacts the involved people physically, emotionally and mentally. Workplace violence is never tolerable, and the impact assessment should reflect as much.

Impacts can also extend to people not directly involved in a workplace violence incident. These indirect impacts can include reduced productivity, increased turnover, absenteeism, decreased staff morale and burnout, among others. Workplace violence is a serious threat to the overall health and well-being of the transit workforce and poses an especially painful challenge to the transit industry when workforce retention is of increasing concern. When workplace violence impacts hiring and retention, it can affect service delivery.

Most transit operators are public agencies operating with generally high expectations and a higher degree of scrutiny and public disclosure requirements than many private-sector workplaces. Additionally, transit agency services are publicly available. The workplace for a transit agency can be an interface between the transit operator and the public ridership, increasing exposure to the community in a way that few other workplaces typically see. As a result, impacts of workplace violence can also negatively impact public perception and the agency's ability to deliver services. Workplace violence can fuel a negative feedback loop for transit in a way that is not typically seen in the private sector. Workplace violence can hurt an agency's reputation and impact ridership, which can then decrease the agency's ability to deliver transit services and lead to increased isolation and more opportunities for violence.

Impacts on property should also be factored into an impact assessment. Workplace violence can include property damage, theft and sabotage. Certain incidents may prompt a facility or station shutdown, and agencies may need to implement continuity of operations and service restoration plans. Indirect impacts can include diversion of resources (financial, personnel, time), increased security costs, and increased workers' compensation costs.

4.2 Employee assistance

Just as each incident of workplace violence is unique, each person who experiences workplace violence may have unique needs when it comes to employee assistance. Further, their personal history and role in transit service delivery can influence who people are comfortable communicating with after experiencing workplace violence. It is important to provide employees a range of support services that are clearly communicated, accessible and available free of charge. Barriers to using employee assistance, such as filing a worker's compensation claim before being able to access assistance, should be identified and removed.

An EAP can be both preventive and aid in recovering from workplace violence.

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

EAPs are commonly available in the transit industry, but they are not as well-understood and utilized as they could be. Transit agencies that have EAPs should evaluate ways that their program can be more universally understood, accessible and reinvigorated, as applicable. Transit agencies that do not have an EAP should evaluate establishing one and include an implementation plan to maximize its impact.

Additional forms of employee assistance beyond EAPs can be necessary, especially when trying to reach people who may not otherwise accept assistance. Experiencing workplace violence can result in a mix of emotions, especially when transit's public interface can result in incidents of workplace violence being captured on video and shared publicly. Transit agencies should assess the need for resources beyond EAPs, including paid time off, legal support, mental health services and other forms of therapy.

One emerging and powerful tool to support people who experience workplace violence is providing the space and resources for employee support groups among peers (e.g., front-line transit workers). Often, it is easier to open up and process a traumatic experience with people who intrinsically understand because they have been there. Support groups can help destigmatize and connect people who experience workplace violence. Support groups do not need to be resource-intensive. A private space for meeting and the time to do so can be all that is needed for a successful support group. Transit agencies can engage with their front-line workers and together evaluate the interest in support groups. A critical component for these programs is that they are driven by the participants, who are provided the autonomy to establish parameters around their support group.

4.3 Data-driven risk management

Transit agencies are used to dealing with data—schedules, routes, on-time performance, public opinion and more. The same mechanisms transit agencies use to collect, store and analyze those data sources may also be used to understand workplace violence and risk.

As with all data-driven risk management programs, baseline data is needed to understand what people are experiencing and to establish benchmarks against which program effectiveness can be evaluated. For both baseline data and data to track the effectiveness of a workplace violence program, collection can be difficult. Transit agencies should have a clear policy and expectation for reporting, backed up with multiple accessible avenues for reporting. Not everyone has email, for example, so both electronic and physical methods for reporting are necessary.

There should also be clear communication on what needs to be reported. In a society that tends to downplay experiences of violence, especially if they do not result in physical injuries, underreporting is often an issue. Transit agencies need to be clear in their definition of workplace violence and nurture a culture of zero tolerance that takes all forms of workplace violence seriously. Management and leadership must encourage employees to report immediately so they can develop interventions and provide support, as needed.

Another barrier to data collection can be data ownership. When a workplace violence incident involves the police, including transit police, accessing data can be difficult. Data collection programs require collaboration and transparency across stakeholders.

Beyond the typical data points like date and type of event, transit agencies should collect location data and include in their analysis whether there are “hot spots” for workplace violence in their transit systems. Special attention should be given to sites that are less accessible, which can impact both risk of workplace violence and response. Transit agencies should also, where possible, collect data that can be disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and other factors that could impact an employee's experience of workplace violence and risk. All these factors should be evaluated for trends and inform prevention, response and recovery programs.

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

Finally, it is important to close the loop, where possible, with employees who report incidents by providing information about what happened after they reported an incident. Just as it is important to report back to employees who report safety hazards under a transit agency's safety management system, it is crucial to demonstrate that reports are taken seriously and handled in a prompt and effective manner. If employees do not see their reports being received and responded to appropriately, they are less likely to report.

Related APTA standards

APTA-SS-SEM-S-004-09, “Transit Exercises”

APTA SS-SIS-RP-007-10, “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) for Transit Facilities”

APTA SS-SIS-S-017-21, “Security Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Transit”

APTA-SS-SRM-RP-004-11, “Conducting Background Investigations”

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Definitions

direct threat: A significant risk to the health or safety of others that cannot be eliminated by a reasonable accommodation.

workplace violence: A spectrum of behaviors—including overt acts of violence, threats and other conduct—that generates a reasonable concern for safety from violence, where a nexus exists between the behavior and the physical safety of employees and others (such as customers, clients and business associates) on-site, or off-site when related to the organization.

Abbreviations and acronyms

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ASIS	American Society for Industrial Security
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COBRA	Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act
CPTED	crime prevention through environmental design

Transit Agency Workplace Violence Prevention, Response and Recovery Programs

DOL Department of Labor
EAP employee assistance program
FTA Federal Transit Administration
NIOSH National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health
NTI National Transit Institute
OSHA Occupational Safety and Health Administration
SHRM Society for Human Resource Management
TRACS Transit Advisory Committee for Safety

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