

**Testimony by Workplace Solutions  
to  
Hazard Abatement Board  
on  
Workplace Violence Standard  
Albany, NY  
June 16, 2003**

I am Richard V. Denenberg, the Co-Director of Workplace Solutions, a nonprofit, multidisciplinary consortium of professionals in conflict resolution and crisis management. With me is my co-director, Tia Schneider Denenberg, who is a professional mediator and arbitrator. We appreciate having the opportunity to present information to the Hazard Abatement Board on the important subject of violence prevention.

Our organization has been supported by a grant from the Hewlett Foundation for the purpose of designing model violence-prevention programs. Based in the Hudson Valley, we have conducted research and training throughout the US and abroad, and we have advised federal and state agencies. Our experience has been distilled in a volume titled *The Violence-Prone Workplace* (Cornell University Press).

On the basis of what we have learned, we would recommend that the Board's violence-prevention standard encourage public agencies to create consensus-based violence prevention policies, engaging unions and management in a collaborative effort. Such an approach has the best chance of significantly reducing key violence risk factors.

Research has shown that a major risk factor is unresolved conflict among employees and between employees and clients or customers. Even domestic conflict may spill over into the workplace. Some of the most notorious incidents of workplace violence occurred because seemingly trivial conflict was not resolved at an early stage and was allowed to fester until it spiraled out of control.

The failure to intervene in a timely fashion frequently results from the phenomenon of under-reporting—the tendency for employees not to report hazardous conditions, such as threats or extreme behavior. There are several reasons for under-reporting:

- ?? Fear of not being taken seriously
- ?? Fear of negative consequences
  - For career or personal safety
  - For perpetrator
- ?? Shame and embarrassment
- ?? Not clear what to report
- ?? Lack of trust

The latter factor, which is perhaps the most important, betokens an absence of faith in the violence prevention system. Employees are not convinced that the policy has been created for their protection, and they fear victimization. The best way to insure buy-in and eliminate under-reporting is for the union to be involved with the employer in promulgating and implementing a violence-prevention policy.

An excellent example of a consensus policy is that which was created by the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) and two unions, CSEA and Public Employees Federation, in June, 2001. We had the privilege of helping the parties develop the policy, which has many notable strengths:

1. It provided a comprehensive statement of prohibited conduct, covering both physical and verbal conduct. The policy bans:
  - Disruptive Behavior
  - Threatening Behavior
  - Coercive or Harassing Behavior
  - Violent Behavior
  - Possession of Weapons
2. It assured employees of the agency's commitment to enhance their safety by
  - Fostering a non-hostile work environment
  - Reducing the risk of violence
  - Responding immediately to threats or acts
  - Promoting resolution of conflict
3. It was based on focus group research into the actual hazards at HESC, as perceived by the employees.
4. A clear-cut channel for reporting hazards, including threats or ominous behavior, was established.

5. The role of employees in preventing crises was defined:

“A crisis is a threat of violence or an actual instance of violence. A primary goal of all employees is to reduce the risk of crisis. This is done through preventive measures, including training; conflict and tension management; and intervention; and well before there is misconduct with possible disciplinary implications.”
6. An office (the bureau of Human Resource Management) was designated to take the initiative during a crisis to:
  - ?? Mobilize all necessary resources, including threat assessment experts, conflict resolution specialists, security professionals, mental health professionals and counselors, including consultants from outside the state service
  - ?? Organize crisis aftermath measures, including trauma counseling
  - ?? Keep the workforce informed about the policy
  - ?? Arrange for periodic skills training and policy education for managers, supervisors, and other employees
7. A standing body, the Workplace Violence Prevention Advisory Committee, was created as a strategic planning and self-correction mechanism. It has representation from management and union, and it is tasked with the responsibility to
  - a. Assess Risk
  - b. Recommend:
    - i. Early intervention when necessary
    - ii. Prevention and risk reduction measures
    - iii. Measures for avoiding recurrences
    - iv. Changes in policy, guidelines or training
8. It deals with the potential threat to the workplace from domestic violence by urging employees to
  - a. Recognize signs of victimization
  - b. Ensure victims are aware of protections against abuse
  - c. Create alternative work arrangements
  - d. Recommend special training
  - e. Link through EAP to resources

This policy is admirably suited to overcome the under-reporting phenomenon because employees know exactly what to report and where to report, and they have every reason to believe that their report will be taken seriously. We would urge that the standard adopt this policy as a model and prompt other agencies to approach the task in a similar fashion.

It also would be useful for the Board to outline the process by which a sound violence prevention program can be created. We envision five basic steps:

- 1) Assessment of Risk
  - a. Conduct Focus Groups/Surveys
  - b. Review Past Experience
- 2) Policy Development
  - a. Define Prohibited Conduct
  - b. Specify Safety Guarantees
- 3) Structural Change
  - a. Create Prevention Mechanisms
  - b. Create Intervention Capabilities
- 4) Cultural Change
  - a. Encourage Responsibility
  - b. Empower Bystanders
  - c. Resolve Conflict Early
- 5) Training
  - a. Impart concepts related to conflict and risk reduction
  - b. Improve skills in mediation and problem-solving
  - c. Use interactive training methods, based on “crisis simulations”