

Active Shooter Risk: More Manageable Than You Might Think

Active shooter incidents are so random, how could anyone prepare for them? And surely there are likelier risks claiming our attention. But understanding active shooter incidents as a type of workplace violence, which is all too common in America, places them on a continuum of risk that can and should be managed.

Workplace violence, according to OSHA, is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening, disruptive behavior that occurs at the worksite. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and homicide. Nearly 2 million American workers a year report having been victims of workplace violence, and many more cases go unreported. For the construction industry, dealing with the risks of workplace violence is a logical extension of their efforts to manage issues of risk and safety.

A good beginning is to establish a zero-tolerance policy for workplace violence of all types, either as a stand-alone policy or as part of a larger safety and health program. According to OSHA, "it is critical to ensure that all workers know the policy and understand that all claims of workplace violence will be investigated and remedied promptly."

Alertness for early warnings of violent intentions may allow construction companies to prevent an incident. Active shooters often talk about their intentions or display signs of instability or hostility that workers can be taught to recognize and report as a concern.

Managing the Risk

In the event that violence reaches emergency level, having a plan all staff have practiced implementing

will reduce their exposure to risk. Studies show that employees who train for an emergency tend to act effectively, whereas those without training tend to panic. Active shooter incidents are usually over in 10 to 15 minutes, before the arrival of law enforcement. That makes site workers the first responders.

Run. Hide. Fight. Those are the three options the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recommends in an active shooter incident, and they should be attempted in that order. Escape if you can, helping others if possible. Hide if you can't run, locking doors and turning off lights and cell phone ringers. And if you can't run or hide, commit to disrupting the shooter with all you've got, coordinating with others if possible.

Workplace safety and health attorneys Linda Otaigbe and Nickole Winnett, at Jackson Lewis P.C., recommend that general contractors ask to see each subcontractor's active shooter emergency response plan, and discuss its adequacy to the particulars of the site and the training employees have received, prior to starting work. They also recommend contractors coordinate their drills with subcontractors on multiple sites throughout the year to help make sure all workers know how to respond on each site. In addition, each site needs a Threat Response Team, consisting of both management and non-management members, to

implement emergency protocols, conduct a headcount of evacuees at a predetermined assembly area, tend to the wounded and coordinate with law enforcement officers.

Stepping Up

Very few workplace emergency plans, however, currently address or train for workplace violence. "Nobody's doing this well," says Bo Mitchell, a former police commissioner who now heads an emergency preparedness consultancy. "I can guarantee you three things in life: death, taxes and you don't have an OSHA-compliant emergency action plan." (Although OSHA regulations do not specifically require employers to plan for an active shooter incident, OSHA guides include workplace violence resulting in bodily harm or trauma as an example of the definition of a workplace emergency.) "Employers need to develop an all-hazards plan for foreseeable circumstances," says Mitchell, "whether it's tornadoes or active shooters."

OSHA and the Department of Homeland Security publish information to support employers in developing active shooter emergency plans. Otaigbe and Winnett's article in *Construction Executive* provides a useful brief, and emergency management consultants can provide valuable guidance to construction companies in managing the rare but potentially devastating risks of workplace violence. ■