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Preparing employees and properties for workplace violence

Every week, an average of 20 people are murdered and 18,000 are assaulted while working. More than half of those murders and 85 percent of non-fatal assaults occur in the retail and service industries.

These statistics provided by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health point to the alarming trend of workplace violence. Indeed, according to the sixth annual survey of "Top Security Threats Facing Corporate America," conducted by Pinkerton's Inc., workplace violence is the most important security threat to America's largest corporations.

From hostage situations to robberies to assaults, the key to avoiding such workplace tragedies is careful planning and training on the part of both management and employees. "Research on workplace violence reveals that as many as two-thirds of these violent acts are preceded by behavioral 'red flags' and might have been prevented had coworkers or management acted on their observations or instincts," noted Louis A. Tyska, senior managing director of Pinkerton Consulting & Investigations, in a Safety and Health Magazine article.

Indeed, with two million people a year falling victim to workplace violence, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, it is imperative that property managers and their staffs become well trained and prepared for hostage situations and other violent crimes in the workplace. While violent crimes occurring in post offices, convenience centers and retail malls nab the most media attention, the fact is that violence is evident in all kinds of workplaces.

For today's real estate manager, this somber realization means creating effective emergency preparedness plans and training staff in key areas. Some issues to be considered include the following:

PAGE

2

Journal of Property Management January 1, 2001

Building Evacuation Plan

It is essential to train all of your tenants in the building's evacuation plan. In a hostage situation, for example, with a gunman in the building, it is

extremely important to evacuate tenants as quickly and efficiently as possible. Designate a specific regrouping area where tenants can account for all of their employees. Most importantly, when it comes to your building's evacuation plan, practice, practice, practice. Make scheduled fire drills a regular part of your emergency preparedness plan.

Building Blueprints

Do you have current blueprints for each floor of your building? If so, could you locate them quickly in an emergency? The police need blueprints of the floors so that they can be familiar with the walls, layout, door locations, etc. Since no one knows the building better than your building staff, be sure to make them available to police officials in order to answer questions regarding such key areas as electrical room locations, telephone systems and entry access points.

Elevators

Do you have keys to the elevators, and are your building employees trained to operate the elevators on independent service? It is very important that the elevators be shut down and brought to a floor that is out of harm's way. The last thing that you want is an elevator to respond to the floor where the hostage situation is located by a hall call button. The building employees are in the building and valuable time can be wasted if you have to wait on the elevator company to send an employee to operate your elevators.

Command Center

It is advisable to establish either tenant space or vacant space within the building as a command center for authorities. In hostage situations, a large amount of equipment and personnel is required to resolve the situation. In addition to the command center, you will also need space to accommodate family members and other support people such as the American Red Cross. Keep in mind, too, that a central location for hostage negotiators and police is needed where they can make decisions regarding the best course of action to pursue.

Employee Identification

Most building staff members wear uniforms, but what about your management staff? It is important that all management personnel have photo IDs. The police are in a difficult situation not knowing who is authorized to be in the building. Photo identification for management employees will make it easier for the police to determine who is authorized to enter the building. It is important that your staff understand they should not carry anything in their hands or equipment that could be misconstrued as a weapon. In addition, they should understand that the law enforcement officials have authority over the building and they are to follow the directions they are given by the police.

Building Keys

It cannot be overemphasized that master keys of the building be readily

PAGE

3

Journal of Property Management January 1, 2001

available in such an emergency. Authorities will need access to a variety of areas in the building. One must remember that during an emergency, time is of the essence and decisions are made in minutes, so when the authorities need to have doors opened, you need to have the keys available. Do not forget that "keys" does not mean only door keys but other keys as well, such as those to

elevators, fire alarm panels, etc. This is important in hostage situations where, for example, the elevator may be used to shuttle emergency personnel to a staging area in the building.

Building Security

Unless there is some forewarning, there may be very little that security can do to prevent a hostage situation. It is best to involve the police as soon as possible if a situation appears to have the potential to escalate. In most commercial buildings, security guards are not armed, therefore; the security guards need to know the building emergency preparedness plan for the building. Building security guards can effectively be utilized to:

- * Direct tenant employees to the designated regrouping areas
- * Crowd control for media
- * Miscellaneous tasks that may arise
- * Assist in the evacuation of the building

Since, in most cases, the police will be in charge of the situation, the security officers can be another resource for them. It is important that building security be trained to deal with hostage situations and to clearly understand their role.

Communications

Without a doubt, one of the most important challenges of an emergency situation is communication. In a hostage situation, negotiators will need to use telephones. Does your building staff have two-way radios? In any emergency, two-way radios are helpful in communicating with employees.

Building Contractors

Someone in the building needs to know if there are any contractors working in the building; their safety and location needs to be relayed to the authorities since contractors may or may not be familiar with your building. The property manager needs to remember that contractor employees may not be dressed like the employees in the building and they may have tools that could be mistaken for weapons in an emergency situation. Contractors need to be included with those who need to evacuate the building.

Media

In cases of emergencies that occur on their properties, property managers must be well prepared to deal with the media. During the emergency, the police will keep the media away from your building. Obviously, the media will want information about the emergency. Property manager needs to train their employees to deal with the media.

PAGE

4

Journal of Property Management January 1, 2001

Some suggestions on dealing with the media include:

- * Designate one person to meet with the media and answer questions
- * Be prepared ahead of time with what you plan to say to the media.

- * Be sensitive to the victims and their families.
- * Praise the local authorities for all of their efforts.
- * Be truthful; try not to seem evasive.

It is important to be aware that the media will be calling your main office trying to obtain a comment. Thus, make sure to appoint a designated spokesperson ahead of time and communicate this information to all office employees.

If providing written statements to the press, make sure it is reviewed by your legal counsel ahead of time, if at all possible.

Tenant Relations

During an emergency, many times the property manager will be so focused on the tasks at hand that the tenants who are displaced are not considered until the emergency is over. It is essential to develop a plan ahead of time in order to meet the needs of your tenants during the emergency. Keep in mind that during a true emergency, tenants will evacuate the building quickly, leaving behind their keys, purses, money, etc. Do you have a plan to move displaced employees to adjacent buildings, or will they have to stand in the parking lot? Keep in mind that some situations will take many hours to resolve. A hostage situation can typically take up to eight hours or more to resolve.

Thus, it is important to have available essential in an emergency situation such as food, water, telephones and access to restroom facilities. Tenants will long remember the way property management staff handled the emergency situation and the services they provided.

When It's Over

After the suspect is in custody, there is still work to be done. First, remember that your building is now a crime scene. Photos, witness statements, etc. will need to be taken. Even though many tenants undoubtedly left behind personal items during the evacuation process, do not allow tenants to freely return to their respective floors. Instead, consider the following:

* Make sure all tenant entrance doors are locked so that a key is needed to return to the space.

* Escort employees to their office space to retrieve their personal belongings.

* Open the building up by floors. For example, begin with a specific floor and take employees up on the elevator that is still on independent service.

The follow up to such an incident is very important. Plan to set up a

PAGE

5

Journal of Property Management January 1, 2001

meeting with the local authorities to discuss the incident and help your tenants deal with the situation. In addition, remember to write letters as soon as possible following the incident thanking those who were helpful in the situation.

Lastly, as the property manager of a building at which a violent crime took place, you need to evaluate the emergency situation and critique the process. It

is good to gather your building staff and discuss all aspects of the situation. Experience is often our best teacher.

Workplace violence is now recognized as being the leading cause of death on the job for women and the No. 2 killer for men. By developing this kind of comprehensive preparedness plan and critiquing your performance to identify areas of improvement, you can help ensure that you are doing everything possible to minimize the effects of a workplace crime for your tenants, their employees and your staff.

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1. Understand the mindset of the potentially violent person.

5 WAYS to Defuse Violence in the Workplace

* The person posing danger is in crisis due to some "triggering" event and is operating outside the bounds of acceptable workplace behavior in both word and demeanor.

2. Take the moral "high road"

* Establish an atmosphere of cooperation

* Do not display anger, fear or anxiety.

* Talk in a calm voice, lower and slower than your counterpart. YOU set the example.

* Understand that angry outbursts on the part of that person can have a positive effect. It allows him to vent negative feelings and thereafter begin to defuse.

* Be absolutely truthful in any discussion with the person. To lose credibility at this stage can be catastrophic.

3. Listen to the aggrieved party and allow a total "airing" of the grievance without comment or judgement.

* Offer the person a private place to talk.

* Maintain full eye contact. It's a sign of respect and it indicates he's getting your FULL attention.

* His perceptions are his reality. Do not argue with his perceptions.

* If you talk at all, ask questions that call for long, narrative answers.

PAGE

6

Journal of Property Management January 1, 2001

This does two things:

* A. You assure the aggrieved party that you want to hear ALL he has to say and

* B. This assists in the defusing process

4. Allow the aggrieved party to suggest a solution.

* A person will more readily agree to a resolution that he or she helped formulate.

* Assure the person that you will act on any injustices he has suffered...then make absolutely sure you do just that.

* It may surprise you that his suggestion may be very reasonable.

5. Move toward a win-win resolution

* As you make a concession, ask him to do likewise. Try to get "something for something". In the overwhelming number of cases, the person just wants fairness.

* When he asks "What have you done for me?" Tell him, "I have preserved your dignity and respect and I want to seek a resolution that benefits us all."

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