

Good Practice Guide

Adopting a Workplace Violence Policy

This guide supports government organisations to take an effective stance against workplace violence and, in particular, whether to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to violence.

Overview

It is good practice that government organisations take a strong and public stance against violence in their workplaces. A good way of achieving this is to have an organisational policy on workplace violence.

Organisations are required to think carefully about the implications of their workplace violence policy and ensure their service design, operational policies and support for workers and managers align with the policy.

Such a policy needs to be part of a broad risk approach, which means thinking about the root cause of any harmful event, the likelihood it will occur and the consequences if it does.

See WorkSafe New Zealand's position on [Risk Management at Work](#), which provides a helpful overview of what you should focus on when managing risk and how you should manage risk as a duty holder.

Control measures

Once you have assessed risk you can identify control measures to eliminate and/or mitigate risk. Possible control measures are split into five types (it is likely that you will need control measures from all five):

- 1 Architectural/layout
- 2 Policies and procedures
- 3 Training
- 4 Emergency
- 5 Other security measures

A policy against workplace violence

It is good practice to have a strong and emphatic policy against workplace violence supported by effective guidance and procedures. Such a stance should signal to both workers and the public where the organisation draws the line in terms of violent or threatening conduct and the consequences of such behaviour.

Some organisations describe this as a 'zero tolerance' policy. However, a strong stance against violence is not necessarily the same as zero tolerance. See the 'What is Zero Tolerance' section below. A good policy would:

- clearly define (in practical and usable ways) what behaviour is unacceptable and set out the consequences for failing to comply
- be developed in consultation with customers and by engaging with workers and their representatives (including contractors)
- outline robust governance and oversight of decision-making to ensure it remains effective, reasonable, and fair
- cover all forms of workplace violence and threatening behaviour including customer-initiated violence, family violence and other forms of work-related violence.

See Worksafe New Zealand's [Violence at Work: Customer Service Areas](#), which explains how a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) that is office-based can prevent or deal with violence at work.

Communication and training

Organisations should support their workplace violence policy with effective communication and training. The main objective of this is to ensure both customers and staff understand and can operate within the policy.

Key areas of support should include:

- tools and training for frontline workers to enable them to take strong, decisive and timely action to deal with workplace violence
- mechanisms and opportunities to enable frontline workers and managers to share experiences, test thinking and make sensible judgements about dangerous or threatening customers
- guidance and procedures that frontline workers can take to channel violent or high-risk customers into more secure, alternative service delivery channels
- guidance and support to enable workers to make fair, reasonable, and sensible decisions based on good administrative law practices and principles such as natural justice.

Consider giving workers a range of responses to enable them to respond appropriately to varying levels of unacceptable behaviour, threat or violence (such as de-escalation training). However, if an organisation does provide a range of responses it will need to support this with training, tools, and other assistance.

It is good practice to use your organisational policy as a basis for regular discussions between managers and workers about what this means and how it is working in your specific environments.

You can use these types of discussions as ways to feed information through to governance and senior leaders about how well the policy is working in practice. This can also help you to adjust your training and operational practices if you need to.

You may also find these discussions generate case studies that your organisation (and others if you share them) could use in training and communications about security and security culture.

It is also good practice to reinforce your workplace violence policy with requirements about reporting incidents and threats, and with performance measures relevant for your environment that are reported to managers at all levels.

A leadership statement as well as an organisational policy

It is good practice that government organisations have a strong statement from the chief executive expressing their position on workplace violence. Such a statement would make clear the chief executive's commitment to workplaces being free of violent and threatening behaviour and worker safety. Such a statement can support an organisational policy. However, it does not replace the need for an organisational policy.

What is zero tolerance?

Organisations such as WorkSafe New Zealand, the International Labour Organisation, and the Public Service Association advocate the need for a 'zero tolerance' statement approach to workplace violence. The term 'zero tolerance' is often used as shorthand to describe an emphatic organisational position against certain violent or threatening behaviour.

In its simplest form, such a stance can provide an organisation with a simple, no-nonsense approach that is easy to understand, communicate, and operationalise. However, such an approach only makes sense when it is framed with a clear set of definitions about what the organisation considers is and is not unacceptable behaviour.

Before adopting a zero tolerance approach it is good practice to consider the following:

- government organisations cannot deny customers services they need; if a customer is affected by a zero tolerance policy then you will need to have a safe, alternative means for delivering services to that customer
- government organisations deal with people with complex issues and behaviours including some with extreme behavioural or cognitive difficulties; this does not mean that government organisations have to accept violent or threatening behaviour from these customers, however, these difficult customers often rely heavily on effective support from government organisations
- organisations and individuals within organisations can have differing tolerances based on their experience and understanding of their customers; for example, threatening statements from a disgruntled customer with dementia may be treated differently than threatening statements made by an angry customer dealing with a policy agency, being clear about criteria and definitions can help.

Implementing a zero tolerance policy

When using a zero tolerance policy as a control measure it is good practice to include the following:

- risk profiling of clients to produce tailored management plans, which may include meetings by appointment and behaviour alerts
- alternatives for high risk clients (e.g. phone only contact, specialised engagement units)
- expectations that all incidents will be notified – encourage workers to report and positively recognise those that report appropriately.

It is also good practice to have procedures for:

- how to deal with customers (e.g. recognising and managing unacceptable behaviour)
- how to keep workers safe (e.g. position themselves so they have an escape route)
- what to do when confronting acts of violence
- locking back doors and windows
- carrying out banking
- notifying, recording and investigating incidents
- warning and trespassing clients
- calling Police and informing other agencies as appropriate and justified.