Good Practice Guide
Dealing with Customer-initiated Aggression and Violence

This guide supports government organisations to think about how they and their workers deal with the risk of aggressive customers.

Customer aggression is a known risk

All workers in government organisations face the risk of customer aggression. Clearly some workers, such as those delivering difficult front-line services, have a higher risk than others. Because of this, all government organisations should take the issue seriously. This guide provides some broad guidance.

Eliminating the risk

Like any other risk to the health and safety of people, government organisations will first consider whether it is practicable to eliminate this risk. For example, completely re-thinking how a service is delivered can go a long way to reducing the risk to front-line workers.

It is unlikely a single solution will completely eliminate this risk. In fact, it is just as likely that a single solution will create new and different risks and issues that will need addressing. This process of identifying solutions and considering flow-on effects and then making adjustments is a fact of life when it comes to dealing with complex issues.

Minimising risks

If eliminating the risk is not practicable, then government organisations will consider how they can minimise the risk of violence and aggression. Again, it is unlikely a single solution will mitigate all of the risks. So, it is good practice for government organisations to consider a number of strategies. For example, they can:

- identify and analyse factors that create or exacerbate the risk of aggression and violence; this analysis can, for example, reveal what motivates violence or uncover patterns that may help inform planning

- use the analysis about what creates aggression and violence to inform service design and delivery. If frustration from queues or talking to multiple customer service workers across different service channels creates aggravation then good service design may address those

factors. Understanding how a customer experiences services can help organisations to shape and deliver services in ways that reduce aggravating factors.

Support excellent service delivery by providing workers with the tools and training they need to recognise and respond to escalating aggression.

Have strong organisational policies and procedures that make it clear that inappropriate/aggressive behaviour and violence are not acceptable and setting out clear consequences for those who cannot or will not control themselves. Consider making the policy clear to customers e.g. in face to face service areas.

Undertake effective risk assessments and risk planning before dealing with uncertain situations. This can include giving workers the training and tools they need to make assessments of people and locations to identify potential threats or risks. As an organisation, it could include having a more systematised approach to identifying and managing risks and threats. It can also involve analysing events and near-misses to draw out lessons for the future.

Make workplaces less of a target for aggravated robbery (and the associated risk of violence) by eliminating or reducing valuables (like money or valuable documents like blank passports) being held in front-facing areas. It is important to think broadly about what is valuable.

Implement access control and hard fit-out security measures. Refer to other guidance.

Dealing with incidents: de-escalation or withdrawal

Even the best designed and delivered service can turn hostile. Given this, government organisations need to think carefully about how they want to support their workers and frontline managers to respond.

Some organisations will provide their workers with training on how to de-escalate hostile or threatening situations. Using training material and case studies that are specific to the real life situations in your service functions is especially helpful. As is involving your frontline workers in developing and refreshing policies and training for de-escalation.

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By contrast, some organisations will encourage their workers to avoid engaging with hostile customers at all and, instead, withdraw safely from the encounter.

Both approaches have their merits and risks that organisations should think through carefully.

While immediate withdrawal may seem like the safest option it risks further aggravating distressed customers if the worker withdraws from an interaction too abruptly and without much provocation. A worker withdrawing from a service can also leave a hostile customer alone or in a public area.

These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Government organisations could, for example, provide their workers with the tools and training they need to try and de-escalate situations to the extent they feel comfortable and then withdraw at the point they no longer feel safe.

Policies and training for de-escalation should be:

- clear about what to do if de-escalation is not helping e.g. who else to involve and when

- integrated with other physical security management practices such as lockdown procedures

Organisations should have plans and procedures for keeping other people such as customers or visitors safe if, for example, a workplace is locked down or if a worker decides to withdraw from a hostile situation.

Post-incident

Whatever strategies or techniques an organisation chooses to respond to aggressive and violent situations, they will think through how they will respond after the incident. For example, it is good practice for organisations to ensure affected workers have access to the support they need to deal with the incident. This can include Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) services, debrief sessions, and other forms of collegial and organisational support.

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