

Preventing Workplace Violence



A Guide for
Montana State Employees

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PREFACE

State employees provide a variety of services to Montana citizens. The nature of services provided, coupled with complex psychological, social, and interpersonal issues, may result in an angry or violent encounter with a co-worker, citizen, or client.

This guide is intended to help state employees to recognize and respond to aggressive or threatening behaviors to prevent hostility from escalating to violence. Practical safety tips regarding meetings, incident reporting, and travel are also included.

We recognize that a set of guidelines such as these cannot possibly address all safety and security issues facing state employees on the job. We are particularly aware of the limitations involving employees who work in law enforcement and correctional environments.

State agencies may obtain additional copies of this guide from Print and Mail Services (444-1833). Please forward comments, suggestions, and recommendations to Risk Management and Tort Defense Division, P.O. Box 200124, Helena, MT 59620-0124.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), approximately two million Americans are the victims of workplace violence each year! During 2006, there were 551 workplace homicides, representing almost ten percent of all workplace fatalities. Violence at work is among the leading causes of death on the job.

Most jobs are not inherently violent. However, relationships between employees and co-workers may become strained due to personality differences, personal issues, or work-related stress. Likewise, confrontations between state employees, citizens, or clients may quickly escalate from anger to verbal threats or even physical assault.

Violence will not be tolerated in Montana State Government workplaces. Hostile behaviors involving citizens and clients will be investigated and referred to law enforcement agencies, if necessary. State employees that injure or threaten co-workers or others may be subject to disciplinary action and criminal prosecution.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Human interactions do not occur in a vacuum. What you say and how you act towards others affects how they feel. The way that others feel about you may alter their response to you. **State employees must consistently and conscientiously channel communications and actions towards others in a positive manner in order to avoid potentially violent confrontations.**

Here are some suggestions:

- **Introduce yourself.** A handshake is a great way to lessen tensions. When first meeting in person, clearly state your name and identify your job and your agency. If asked, show the person your identification or a letter of authorization. State employee identification cards are available from the General Services Division of the Department of Administration.

- **If someone comes to you, ask how you may help.** Do this whether you are greeting a stranger or a prior contact whose purpose you don't know.
- **Listen carefully.** Ask clarifying questions.
- **If you initiated the meeting, explain its purpose.** Do so in a calm and professional manner. Observe the individual's initial reactions and body language. If the person is cooperative, move ahead with your purpose.
- **Treat all people respectfully and courteously.** Respect personal space. Watch for cues that an individual is uncomfortable with the personal space you have established. Start out about a leg-length apart and adjust your distance as the conversation requires.
- **Recognize your own attitudes and eliminate those that are counterproductive.** If you allow irritation with the person to affect your actions, you risk making the situation worse.
- **Treat others as you would like to be treated.**

EARLY SIGNS OF HOSTILE BEHAVIOR

Most people don't just blow up without warning. They go through specific stages before they become violent. State employees must recognize these early stages of hostile behavior and respond appropriately to prevent hostility from escalating to violence.

There are two types of behavior that typically precede violence. These "pre-violent" behaviors are "anxiety" and "defensiveness".

Anxiety

Anxious people are often nervous. You may notice them wringing their hands, fidgeting, drumming fingers, or pacing.

Cold, moist hands during a handshake are another sign of anxiety. Another indication is a person who is perspiring heavily. Anxious types also have trouble maintaining eye contact, or they may seem distracted.

Reasons for anxiety include, but are not limited to, stress, anger, personal issues, or prior negative experiences with government to name a few. Remember, for some people interactions with government are like going to a dentist—they may not feel comfortable, or they may be asking themselves, “How much will it cost?” and “Is it going to hurt?”

Your Response:

Smile, be supportive, and remain calm. Use “ice breaker” questions such as, “How are you doing?” or, “Isn’t the weather nice today?” Make them feel comfortable by the courteous and professional way that you treat them. Help them understand that you will do what you can to make their experience as painless as possible.

Defensiveness

Anxiety may escalate to defensiveness. Defensive people are often loud or belligerent. They may challenge authority or lose rationality. Angry gestures or raised voices are not uncommon.

There are four stages of defensive behavior:

Stage 1. Questioning

Defensive people typically ask two distinct types of questions, which require distinct answers:

1. **Information seeking questions.** “How long is this going to take?” or “What information must I provide?”
2. **Challenging or evasive questions.** “I filled out that form last year—why do I have to do it again?” or “What do you mean I

need your permission to do that?” What they are really saying is, “Who are *you* to tell me what to do?”

Your Response:

Respond to information-seeking questions by providing accurate information as soon as possible. Communicate in a simple, direct and straightforward manner. Respond to challenging or evasive questions by getting the person back on topic. In either case, carefully and calmly answer their questions and explain why the process is necessary. If they persist in their defensive behaviors, then set limits (see Stage 2).

Stage 2. Refusal

Your co-worker, citizen, or client may refuse to perform some act required by your process that you need in order to provide the service they are requesting, such as refusing to provide information. At this stage, the person has lost some rationality.

Your Response:

In the face of refusal, your best response is to provide clarifying directions and/or set limits.

- **Providing directions** means explaining concrete actions that the person must take to get what they want. For example, if you need them to complete a form, you could say, “Please write your name here.”
- **Setting limits** means offering the person choices with the consequences of each choice. It redirects them to what needs to be done, but also gives them a feeling of control. In other words, *they* decide what happens next. For example, say, “If you work with me to complete this form, I can expedite your new license; but if you don’t, your current license will expire in 30 days.”

Setting limits also establishes behavioral boundaries which, if crossed, will have consequences. Those consequences are 1) that you can provide the service the individual is seeking if they cooperate; or 2) that if they refuse to cooperate, they may need to leave your premises and not return until they can act more rationally.

When you offer choices, always offer the positive choice first.

If you offer the negative choice first, anger may prevent the defensive individual from even hearing the positive choice. This is particularly true if the negative choice involves asking them to leave.

Directions and limits are most effective when they are clear, simple, reasonable, and enforceable.

1. **Clear** means that the alternatives must be distinct and that one alternative must offer a reward. Don't assume that the reward of the positive choice is obvious to the person. Be sure they understand what's in it for them.
2. **Simple** means that the limits can't be confusing or complicated. Address only one or two requirements at a time, and avoid jargon.
3. **Reasonable** means that the person must be capable of accomplishing your limits.
4. **Enforceable** means that you must be prepared to deliver either outcome—in other words, that you have the authority and ability to do what you promised.

Stage 3. Tantrum

A person has an emotional outburst that may include yelling or swearing. Dramatic movements like waving arms, pointing fingers, or stomping around are not uncommon.

Your Response:

- If you can do so safely, allow the person to vent. They will be much easier to deal with once they calm down.
- Remove the audience if possible. A person having a tantrum will carry on longer with an audience. If others are watching, try to get them out of sight. This may mean taking customers to another area and/or having employees return to work.
- Be understanding. If you become angry, the situation will escalate. When the person calms down, give non-threatening directions. You must, however, be prepared to enforce any limits that you set.

Stage 4. Intimidation

A person threatens you or other staff members. The threat may be direct such as, "I'm going to punch you!" or veiled such as, "Maybe you'd pay more attention to me if you realized what I was capable of doing to you."

Your Response:

- Do not touch a person exhibiting this kind of behavior! Physical contact at this stage may trigger physical violence.
- Take threats seriously. Threatening physical harm is a crime, don't ignore it or pretend it didn't happen.
- Get help! At a minimum, notify a colleague or your supervisor. You may have to involve law enforcement personnel. Individual intervention at this stage is dangerous and difficult.
- Use the incident report forms provided at the end of this guide to report threatening behaviors to your supervisor.

CO-WORKERS

According to the experts, most employees that have committed a violent act towards a co-worker exhibit one or more of the following behaviors:

- Irrational beliefs and ideas, or drastic change in belief systems.
- Verbal, nonverbal, or written threats or intimidation.
- Unusual fascination with weaponry and/or acts of violence.
- Plans to hurt self or others.
- Frustration over unreciprocated romantic obsession.
- Behavior or work performance problems.
- Feared by co-workers/clients.
- Unwarranted anger.
- New or increased source of stress at home or work.
- Unable to accept criticism.
- Feels victimized.
- Intoxication from alcohol or other substances on a regular basis.
- Hopelessness or heightened anxiety.
- Productivity and/or attendance problems.
- Violence toward inanimate objects.
- Steals or sabotages projects or equipment.
- Lacks concern for the safety of others.

Do not ignore these signs! If you observe them:

- If it is your co-worker, then you must notify your supervisor immediately.
- If it is your subordinate, then you should evaluate the situation by considering what may be causing the employee's problems.
- If it is your supervisor, then notify that person's manager.

If you witness an altercation between co-workers, here are some key points:

- **Develop a plan.** Don't just jump in! Assess the situation first. How many people are involved? How intense is it? Are there any weapons?
- **Get assistance.** Unless you are trained to intervene, get help. If necessary, use a bystander. Intervention by yourself is dangerous and difficult.
- **Remove onlookers.** Eliminating an audience may allow the participants to back down without losing face.
- **Remain non-judgmental.** Don't make judgments even if it appears obvious who is to blame. How the dispute started is not important now. Your immediate goal is defusing the situation before it becomes worse.
- **Separate the parties.** Tempers will cool more quickly if the participants are out of sight of each other.
- **Follow up.** Work with your supervisor to determine what happened. Both employee and supervisor must report the incident using the forms found in the back of this guide.

CITIZENS AND CLIENTS

Violent confrontations with citizens or clients may occur at your state office or in the field. Such confrontations may occur during appointments and meetings or while you're traveling. In addition, you may be harassed, intimidated, or threatened with a weapon.

The following guidelines will help you plan appointments, meetings, and contacts; and provide relevant safety tips as you travel or interact with potentially violent individuals.

Appointments, Contacts, and Meetings

Care in planning meetings minimizes the risk of violence. Be particularly careful if you have not dealt with an individual before, especially if you have to give the person bad news. The following tips and suggestions will help you prepare for meetings:

- **Review appropriate files before you make personal contact.** Letters from the person, case histories, reporting and payment records, and other documents are all important sources. Be alert for information that may indicate the person you are contacting is hostile.
- **Check with others in your agency that may have had previous contact.** If the person has behaved aggressively toward others, it might be best to contact local law enforcement or other officials to obtain additional information about the person. Notify your supervisor.
- **Plan your contact and establish objectives prior to the contact.** Know your purpose. Prepare an outline of the questions that you will ask and the information needed. Establish goals. This will help you to keep the meeting positive.
- **Where possible, make appointments by telephone first.** Discuss the purpose of your visit by phone before meeting the individual in person. Pay special attention to the person's reaction. Be alert for any uncooperative or unusual responses and note any abusive language.
- **If the person becomes upset** or verbally abusive during the telephone contact, try to defuse the situation over the phone. If you are unable to calm the person, arrange future meetings at a local state office or other public place.

Meetings in Your Workplace

Meetings should be held at state offices if at all possible to reduce the risk of violence or open hostility. This is particularly important if your work results in confrontations or you must give bad news. Here are some tips to keep meetings in your workplace safe:

- **Remove potential weapons.** Don't leave "weapon-like" objects such as letter openers where someone can use them to harm you.
- **Do not become trapped.** Arrange your personal workspace so that you have an escape route without having to pass a visitor. If this is not possible, establish another safe area where you and your colleagues can conduct potentially challenging meetings.
- **Do not become physically isolated.** Here are some ways to avoid isolation:
 1. Hold your meeting in a room with a window where co-workers can see if things go badly.
 2. Install a fixed "panic button" in areas where customers enter and/or use a portable one to take with you into meetings. A remote doorbell system is an inexpensive and effective tool for this purpose.
 3. Establish a "panic phrase" that alerts colleagues without alerting the hostile person. To use it, pick up the phone, call a colleague, and make a seemingly innocuous statement using the phrase.

Meetings in the Field

There is some risk in meeting with citizens or clients on private property. Potentially difficult site visits should include checking in with your office before and after the visit.

- Do not meet at remote locations, especially residences, alone. The goal is to avoid a one on one situation where you may be in danger or accused of sexual harassment or assault.
- If it is absolutely unavoidable and necessary to meet in a questionable location, let your supervisor know before going.
- Schedule visits so that a co-worker can accompany you. In extreme situations, request help from a law enforcement agency.
- Leave an itinerary with your co-workers and/or supervisor. List the names, locations and phone numbers of those you will be visiting. Estimate how long the visits will take.
- When away from your office, check in regularly. Update your location and itinerary and verify your well being, especially before and after contacts where you anticipate hostility.
- If your agency has an office in the area that you are visiting, you may be able to check in there. Arrange with local agency personnel in advance, and leave a copy of your itinerary with them. They may also be able to advise you of any potential issues or past problems with those on your itinerary.
- Take a cellular phone. Most state agencies provide cellular phones for use by agency employees in the field. If you take a phone other than your own, be sure that you know how to use it.
- Drive by the location first, particularly if you don't know the individual or if you are new to the area. Look for things that could affect your safety. Dogs, or the number of vehicles at a residence, could alert you to a potential danger.
- Heed "No Trespassing" signs or posted warnings to public officials, even if you have talked with the person by telephone and have an appointment. Return to a public area and call the individual. Tell them that they will have to bring their records and other documents to a local office or other public place.

- Always park your vehicle so that you can leave quickly. If working in a rural area, park your car facing the road.
- Upon entering a business or residence, be alert to your surroundings. Locate exits and windows. Note suspicious objects in the room. While many residences have firearms or other weapons in them, pay attention to their presence. Interpret the presence of a weapon in a business or other non-residential location as a danger signal. Do not pet dogs or enter areas with unleashed dogs.
- Plan your exit. Never allow yourself to be trapped. Sit nearer to the door than the person you are meeting. Avoid confined or restricted areas that may be difficult to leave quickly.
- Do not interview a person in the presence of friends or customers. An employer may want an employee present who knows more about the topic, but offer the employer an opportunity to excuse the employee before you deliver any bad news. Always try to find a private place to meet.
- If at any time you sense danger, receive threats, or experience harassment, terminate the meeting immediately and leave. You can contact the person again later to arrange to finish the transaction in your office or another public location.
- Use discretion in accepting food or beverages.

IF YOU ARE CONFRONTED BY A WEAPON

Unfortunately, there are no absolutes if you are confronted with a weapon. Even so, here are some tips that may help in that situation:

- **Stay calm.** You are more likely to do the right thing if you can remain in control of your emotions.
- **Do not try to disarm the person.** Unless you are thoroughly trained, such an attempt will probably go badly.

- **Communicate.** An attacker is less likely to shoot you if they perceive you as a fellow human being with a family and problems just like theirs. Tell your attacker your name and about your family if possible.
- **Assess your options.** Keep looking for an escape route. Consider what you could do if your attacker left the room or turned away.
- **Report the incident.** Notify your supervisor and co-workers. Complete the appropriate incident report form found in the back of this guide.

HARASSMENT

Sometimes members of the public or colleagues may treat you in ways that, while not directly threatening, may intimidate you or impede your ability to do your job. Some examples of harassment include:

- Making inappropriate phone calls or visits to your home or office, or sending offensive or threatening letters.
- Making rude, intimidating, demeaning, or suggestive remarks.
- Blocking your exit.
- Using aggressive body language such as pointing gestures close to your face.
- Crumpling documents and throwing them.
- Directing abusive language toward you.
- Following your vehicle.
- Copying your license plate number.

If you are confronted with any form of harassment, document the details of the incident. Include information that will identify the

person who harassed you, what was said, and the names of any witnesses. Report any harassment to your supervisor as soon as possible. In response to the harassment:

- Use common sense and good judgment.
- Do not ask if the statements or actions were intended to be threatening.
- Do not make any further contacts with the individual before discussing the situation with your supervisor.

TRAVEL TIPS

- Consider taking a cellular phone with you and have local emergency numbers handy.
- Know your destination and carry a map. Plan your route and itinerary to allow plenty of time to travel safely. Plan ahead to reach a comfortable and safe place before dark.
- Give your itinerary to a co-worker and your family.
- Do not drive with windows open or doors unlocked in urban areas.
- Avoid leaving your vehicle unattended for long periods. Park in safe places. At night, park only in well-lighted areas near your destination.
- Before you exit your vehicle, scan the immediate area for suspicious persons.
- Before entering a vehicle, especially at night, check inside to make sure no one is hiding there. Look under the car as well.
- When approaching your vehicle, if you see anything suspicious such as people loitering near your car, turn around and leave or walk past the car. Seek help immediately.
- Do not pick up hitchhikers.

- If your vehicle breaks down, pull as far as you can off to the roadside. Turn on emergency flashers, raise the hood, and attach a white handkerchief or article of clothing to the antenna. Get inside, lock the doors, and wait for help from a law enforcement officer. If a motorist stops, talk through a slightly lowered window and ask the person to send help.
- If you suspect that you are being followed, drive to a police or fire station, the emergency room of a hospital, or stop at an open, well-lighted and preferably busy service station to call the police. If none of these measures are possible, blow your horn, turn on your hazard lights, and blink your lights.

HOTEL/MOTEL SAFETY

- Stay at reputable lodging facilities. A location in a safe area of town is an important component of security.
- Hotel/motel guests are most vulnerable in places like parking lots, indoor garages, corridors, and elevators. Do not linger in these areas, and be alert to loiterers.
- When registering, sign your last name and first initial only. Do not use titles or degrees. This makes it more difficult for anyone to determine gender, marital, or professional status.
- Always keep your room number private.
- Familiarize yourself with the facility. Is there an all-night desk clerk? Are the outside entrances locked at night? Is there a security staff? Where are the exits, fire alarms, and extinguishers?
- Exterior windows are an important security consideration. Ground floor windows are easily reached and are accessible to burglars, as are windows near fire escapes and adjacent rooflines.
- Inspect your room to be certain that the door and window locks work, that any door to an adjacent room is locked, and that the phone works. If not, ask for another room.
- When absent from your room, make it seem occupied by leaving on a light or the TV.

- Do not open the door unless you know the identity or motive of the caller. If your door has a peep hole, use it. If there is no peep hole, secure the chain lock, then open the door to verify identity.
- If someone knocks and says they are from the hotel staff, call the front desk to check before opening the door.

HOW TO HANDLE THREATENING INCIDENTS

- If you receive a threat during a telephone conversation, try to collect the following information (*see the Incident Report Forms at the back of this guide*):
 1. Identify the caller including voice characteristics (accents, manner, background noises, etc.)
 2. Note the date and time of the incident.
 3. Note intended actions (what, when, where, how and why).
- If threatened during a personal contact, tactfully end the meeting and leave. Do not attempt to induce the individual to repeat or clarify the threat. Safely remove yourself from the situation. If assaulted, end the contact as soon as it is safe to do so and leave the site of the incident.
- If injured, seek whatever medical attention you deem necessary as soon as possible.
- Immediately report all threats and assaults to your supervisor and to law enforcement for appropriate action. Report threats to Helena based state employees to Capitol Security at 444-3060. They will coordinate with the appropriate agencies. Report threats to state employees based in other areas to local law enforcement agencies. In an emergency situation, contact law enforcement officials first.

- As soon as possible after the threat or assault, write down as many details as you can remember. (*See the Incident Reporting Instructions and Forms at the back of this guide.*) Include information that will identify the person who threatened or assaulted you, including direct quotes, and names of any witnesses.
- Also list the time, date, and location of the incident. Remember, persons making threats or assaults may be prosecuted.
- Arranging training, counseling, or follow-up medical attention for employees if necessary. The state Employee Assistance Program includes a critical incident service. Counselors can provide on-site counseling.
- Implementing specific agency safety policies and procedures.

INCIDENT REPORTING

Employees must notify their supervisor of any threats or assaults on the job.

Supervisors must use their judgment in dealing with reported threats or assaults. Listen to and understand your employee and document the incident with your employee's help. You may choose to complete an Incident Report Form, included in the back of this guide. If appropriate, supervisors should discuss the incident with their supervisor and with security officers.

Supervisors should evaluate the threats or incidents, consult with legal counsel and human resources and, if necessary, notify the appropriate law enforcement agency. The Division of Criminal Investigation of the Department of Justice can advise agencies on whether prosecution is appropriate and in providing liaison with local law enforcement agencies.

Supervisors should also consider:

- Developing a plan for dealing with the individual or group who threatened or assaulted your employee.
- Contacting professionals (law enforcement officials, attorneys, psychologists, etc.) to assist in resolving an incident.

