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VIOLENCE PREVENTION PLANS HELP EMPLOYEES FEEL SAFER

Each year, nearly 2 million American workers report having been victims of workplace violence, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), and these incidents cost employers more than \$120 billion annually in lost wages, lost productivity, counseling, increased insurance costs, lawsuits, settlements and more.

Workplace violence comes in many forms. DOL defines workplace violence as, “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect employees, clients, customers and visitors.”

Maybe you’ve had experience with an employee who bullied others. Or a domestic situation that escalated onto workplace property. Or perhaps an employee came to work wielding a weapon and threatening others.

Mushroom farms are unique in that they are unlike more traditional workplaces like office buildings or even manufacturing sites. No two mushroom farms are the same; they vary in size, facilities, workforce, security features and more.

And because of that, in the event of an active shooter in particular, certain challenges exist. For this article, we spoke with growers, human resources representatives and safety specialists on things you should be thinking about when crafting your own workplace violence plan.

Address Issues Early

Getting in front of a potentially dangerous situation is the best defense. Educate your employees to recognize unacceptable behavior and train your supervisors to address it before it advances to actual violence. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for violent behavior. “We do not tolerate violent behavior in our company,” said Juana Gomez, corporate director of human resources, Monterey Mushrooms. “We emphasize ‘active management,’ meaning we aim to address issues early,

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helping to keep them from escalating, and we strongly enforce our policies, terminating employment, with cause, for violations. There's no room for any type of violent behavior, verbal, physical or any other type, at Monterey Mushrooms."

Create a Plan

In today's environment, it's in a company's best interest to have a workplace violence prevention plan that can be shared with employees. The plan should be clear and concise and provide specific instructions on what employees can do to keep themselves safe.

Experts agree that any effective workplace violence prevention program should include active shooter drills. Not unlike emergency drills for a fire or weather emergency, active shooter drills allow workers to practice what they would do if someone with a gun entered the property or facility.

When crafting a plan, take into consideration that people remember small things, which is why 'call 911' works for emergencies and 'stop, drop and roll' works for a fire. The national protocol for an active shooter is 'run, hide, fight.' If able, workers should flee the building and bring as many colleagues as possible. Run to a safe location away from the building and then call the police. If exits are blocked, seek shelter in an enclosed room and barricade the door shut.

For mushroom farms, this could be a challenge. Think about how many people are moving around your farm each day or even each hour. Do you know who they are and where they are at all times? How would you alert employees of an emergency at all areas of your farm? Is there a safe place for them to run? What about employees who may be in another location across the street, down the road or a few miles away?

Because active shooter situations are often over within 10 to 15 minutes before law enforcement arrives on the scene, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recommends that individuals be prepared both mentally and physically to deal with an active shooter situation.

Good Practices for Coping with an Active Shooter Situation Include:

- **Escape if there is an accessible path.** Be sure to have an escape route and plan in mind. Evacuate regardless of whether others agree to follow. Leave belongings behind and call 911 when you are safe.
- **Hide if evacuation is not possible.** Find a place to hide where the active shooter is less likely to find you. The hiding place should be out of the active shooter's view and provide protection if shots are fired in your direction (i.e. an office with a closed and locked door). To prevent an active shooter from entering your hiding

place, lock the door and block it with heavy furniture. If the active shooter is nearby, lock the door, silence your cell phone and/or pager, turn off any source of noise (i.e. radio, television), hide behind large items (i.e. cabinets, desks) and remain quiet.

- **Fight back as an absolute last resort.** In this case, act as aggressively as possible, throw items and improvised weapons, yell and commit to your actions.

When police arrive, put down any items in your hands, keep hands visible, follow all instructions, avoid making quick movements towards officers and do not stop to ask officers for help or direction when evacuating, just proceed in the direction from which officers are entering the premises.

Employee Participation

Workplace violence can be a difficult topic to discuss with employees, but management should have the conversation and emphasize that any program developed is about keeping people safe. Dr. Steve Albrecht is a security consultant and threat assessment expert based in San Diego. He says a program viewed by workers as benevolent and caring can help cultivate a collective safety effort.

"I don't want companies to overthink it," he said. "I don't want them to create scenarios where people are afraid to come to work, or afraid to participate, or afraid this is going to happen. But say, 'Look, file this away. Get out of the building as safely as possible, barricade as safely as possible, or fight back.' Practice the drill without making it super dramatic."

Workers often feel grateful hearing open, honest dialogue about workplace violence. "A lot of employers are reluctant to do a program because they're afraid that their workforce might think that there's something going on they don't know about," said Marilyn Knight, CEO of Novi, MI-based Incident Management Team. "But my experience has been, rather than being traumatized when a program is implemented, people feel empowered. They're like, 'Oh my gosh, my employer cares about me.'" *mn*

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