

# Work

*Three ways leadership can reduce healthcare workplace violence*

# and Peace

■ By **AlGene P. Caraulia**

**W**hen did you last consider leaving your profession? Not your job, current role, or even the organization that employs you or that you founded. Have you thought about leaving your actual profession—the one you have trained for, the one you chose because you felt a higher calling to help care for people when they need you most?

Is it now? Are you thinking about leaving the healthcare industry because you have had enough? This is the current trend we are seeing, and regardless of how insulated your practice may be, it has wide-ranging ramifications for the industry and its workers.

The mass exodus from healthcare has been caused by many factors, but one stands out, and it is one healthcare leaders can do something about right now.

## **Workplace Violence**

Violence in healthcare workplaces puts great strain on workers throughout the industry. The situation requires healthcare leaders—whether at a large system or a single ambulatory clinic—to take notice and act. While it is true those in executive or leadership roles likely know about this problem, the challenge often is that they are looking for an immediate solution—a quick fix. This approach tends to result in handing the problem to security teams or nursing education groups. However, this problem requires a multidepartmental collaboration and executive ownership to lower the barriers to change that naturally exist.

There is no doubt that the last few years have been among the hardest in recent memory for healthcare workers. According to recent surveys

of nurses by Hospital IQ, 90% of respondents are considering leaving the nursing profession in the next year, and 72% said they were experiencing burnout long before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> On top of the strain felt from COVID-19, an increasing prevalence of workplace violence is making an already difficult situation even worse. In that same survey, 77% of healthcare workers believe workplace violence is a priority, and more than two-thirds report experiencing serious mental health issues such as anxiety or depression as a result.<sup>2</sup>

If you do not know what healthcare workers are experiencing every day, ask them. You likely know a provider, nurse, or patient-care tech who has experienced verbal and/or physical violence from an agitated patient or family member.

Perhaps you have experienced an incident of violence yourself. Whether it concerned a

diagnosis, scheduling challenge, insurance, or bill, multiple factors understandably contribute to increased stress among patients and their families. Violence in a place of healing is unacceptable, yet too often, the steps we take to mitigate violence further inflame anxiety and tension and increase the risk of escalating an incident.

Barricades, security, and task-focused workflows can convey a feeling that patients are widgets in a system of process, setting a tone of indifference. When we adopt empathetic listening, allowing patients/families to process and focus on each individual's experience, we set a caring, patient, and respectful tone. Leading health systems recognize that reducing workplace violence requires more than adding metal detectors and zero-tolerance policies. A holistic approach toward workplace violence will likely retain talented, experienced professionals while attracting top talent in the current competitive employment environment.

### The Starting Place

Adopting a shared belief that all employees are entitled to a safe workplace is a good place to start.

Healthcare leaders have an opportunity to create a positive workplace culture that helps people feel safe, increases employee satisfaction, and aids in recruitment and retention. A safe workplace—with the principles in place to foster and nurture it—is a benefit healthcare employers can offer staff.

The commitment required for this approach is explored in the new *Workplace Violence Prevention Handbook for Health Care Professionals*—a free, digital resource recently published by Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI).<sup>3</sup>

## Sparking Behavioral Change

CPI de-escalation training emphasizes dignity, respect, and holistic well-being. This underlying message can reach all employees, especially when there is alignment among leaders, departments, and those responsible for development, management, and execution of the workplace violence committee's plan. Everyone has a part to play in sparking the behavioral change needed to become a natural part of an organization's work culture.



How can your group begin to chip away at the large and changing landscape of violence prevention? The idea of broaching the subject of workplace violence can sound overwhelming, daunting, expensive, and exhausting. The good news is that there is a path forward. For organizations committed to making a positive impact with workplace violence prevention efforts, it is imperative that they are open to the idea of a cultural shift. An “all-in” approach is essential to succeed in reducing workplace violence incidents, but it can be done. It can happen incrementally and starts with what is already in place.

Be creative when re-imagining how to build up prevention efforts. Realize you are not alone in these efforts. Connect and network with other organizations in the industry. Remove the stigma and bias that may exist around the current workplace violence situation. Be willing to relinquish antiquated ideas, have an open and renewed mindset, and explore the idea of continuous improvement. Remove the cloud of shame that may inhibit an exploration of what is going on and areas where deficits exist. Embrace the idea of transparency and collaboration so that successes and failures can be shared, and learn how to move forward as an industry.

## Empower Workplace Violence Committees

Healthcare organizations, especially large systems with multiple locations and decentralized leadership structures, have started workplace violence committees to address the problem. However, like many committees, they are powerless without executive endorsement or full integration into the daily lives of all employees. When this happens, change does not come, violence and tension linger, and our valued healthcare workers continue the exodus out of the profession to which they were called.

Whether your organization has a workplace violence committee or not, now is the time to empower—or create—that group. Give it the needed spark to ignite holistic, organization-wide change. Adopting evidence-based strategies that bring peaceful resolution to situations that would otherwise turn to conflict will make staff, patients, and visitors feel safe.

Following are three strategies leadership at organizations of all sizes can enact now to improve the efficacy of their workplace violence committees.

**1 Integrate leadership.** Too often, the only authority committees have is to research and collaborate to make recommendations to senior leaders. Committees may discover “the best” solutions but may not have the necessary strategic or fiscal guidance or authority, resulting in limited implementation of recommendations because they fail to align with a long-term strategy. Even when leadership endorses a committee, leaders may not be involved enough to see, hear, and understand what is happening and what barriers exist. Workplace violence committees should include representatives from all areas in the organization, and, crucially, senior leadership should be integrated into the structure to increase accountability and ensure plans are executed while sending a message that this is more than a passing fad. At a minimum, workplace violence prevention committees should be endorsed and understood by senior-level leadership—all the way to the C-suite. Senior-level leadership should work with the committee, including with individuals representing groups, locations, and/or disciplines from throughout your organization.

**2 Measure and report.** CPI’s *Workplace Violence Prevention Handbook for Health Care Professionals* stresses, “It must be measured to be managed.”<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true when comparing one location or community to another. Your workplace violence committee must measure and record acts of violence or escalations to track and pinpoint where increased support is needed and to understand when progress is being made. Each group involved in your workplace violence committee should contribute to a unified standard of reporting, with metrics all agree to. Report results back to the committee at each regular meeting. Do this together to understand the scope of your problem and opportunities to leverage your resources to impact change when, where, and how needed throughout your organization.

**3 Train, cross-train, and reinforce.** It takes commitment to develop a holistic approach to nonviolence in an environment with significant anxiety, tension, and stress. To fully support employee training, provide resources for facility- and department-wide role-based

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# About CPI and Its Handbook

CPI is the world's leading provider of evidence-based de-escalation and crisis prevention training.<sup>4</sup> CPI recently published its *Workplace Violence Prevention Handbook for Health Care Professionals*.<sup>5</sup> This on-demand digital resource provides easy-to-use recommendations and strategies to help individuals at all levels and roles of healthcare improve their workplace violence prevention programming to generate immediate results.

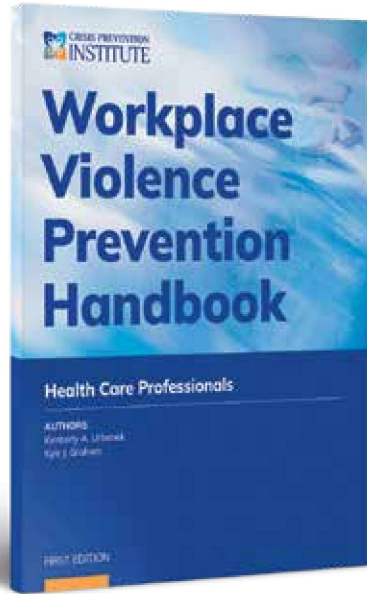
Its standalone chapters help leaders and workplace violence prevention committee members make enhancements regardless of where they are in their workplace violence prevention journey. The Handbook is the first of its kind in the healthcare crisis prevention field and was developed by qualified individuals trained in crisis prevention, with more than 150 total years of experience working in healthcare.

The Handbook helps healthcare organizations create a safe, peaceful environment for workers, patients, and visitors. Use it to enhance and complement current workplace violence prevention plans. When paired with CPI's training programs, it provides a clear path to the changes and accountability required to de-escalate traumatic situations, reduce risk and violence, and create a safe workplace.

The handbook is intended to meet an organization where it is in its workplace violence prevention mission, helping healthcare professionals understand how to:

- ▶ Build or improve workplace violence prevention programs
- ▶ Respond internally to incidents of workplace violence
- ▶ Gather, measure, and manage data to analyze unique organizational challenges
- ▶ Manage training and education needs at all organizational levels, including multisite hospitals and health systems, clinics, outpatient care, and surgery centers
- ▶ Build a holistic culture of violence prevention
- ▶ Balance workplace violence prevention programming with patient advocacy and staff support

Since 1980, CPI has trained more than 15 million people in service-oriented industries across the globe, helping to create cultures of safety across workplaces. By successfully diagnosing, designing, and implementing thousands of workplace violence prevention programs, CPI helps its partners review, reassess, and reinvest in their workplace violence prevention programs with a focus on "Care, Welfare, Safety, and Security" for everyone.



training on workplace violence risks, set goals for team and organization compliance, and encourage wide participation with frequent and transparent communication. It is possible to move an organization from reacting to violence to proactively preventing it by helping people practice empathy and compassion. When everyone in an organization learns how to create meaningful personal connections, they will reduce the fear and anxiety that leads to violence and prioritize safety and security. The *Workplace Violence Prevention Handbook for Health Care Professionals* recommends "training teams to feel empowered to identify and safely manage security concerns proactively. Champion the efforts and do not back down from the struggles. Staff will gain confidence when they see that workplace violence prevention is a significant priority for the organization and when they hear and feel its importance echoed across leadership."<sup>3</sup> (See "Sparking Behavioral Change.") **CPI**

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