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Safety Bulletin: April 2016

Let's Talk About Safety

Date _____

Location _____

Discussion Leader _____



Agenda: Warning Signs Someone is Planning a Workplace Shooting

On February 25th, 2016, a man entered his workplace in Hesston, Kansas, near Wichita, and began firing at co-workers in the shop where they manufactured heavy-duty lawn care equipment. When the smoke cleared, the shooter was dead, shot by a police officer who responded to the situation, but three victims also died, and 14 more were injured.

This type of scenario has occurred with disturbing regularity over the past few years, with firearm rights and firearm regulations becoming a hotbed of political debate. In the occupational safety world, we cannot afford to focus on the “why” of these incidents, rather we must concern ourselves with how to deal with the undeniable fact that the incidents occur, and occur often enough at the workplace. No industry or profession is exempt from this possibility, as shown by recent history, and so it becomes another facet of safety for which employers and employees must be prepared. This safety topic focuses on ways to identify warning signs for individuals who may be planning an armed attack.

In the past, we have looked at workplace violence as fairly logical – a fistfight between workers who are quarreling was a common example – which we could manage through administrative steps and practices. While these type of incidents still occur, and are still manageable mainly through those same steps and practices, the public awareness and focus in recent years has been on the rampages where armed assailants target large groups of individuals, often resulting in high numbers of deaths and injuries. These types of attacks are fundamentally types of terrorism – meaning that the assailants are trying to send a message, whether it be political, ideological, religious, or something else – and these actions do not develop in the same manner as more mundane violence.

A mass shooting can be broken down into five stages:

- Fantasy Stage
- Planning Stage
- Preparation Stage

- Approach Stage
- Implementation Stage

In all but the last stage, intervention can prevent all loss of life and injuries. The stages exist because these acts are not spur-of-the-moment; they are designed by those who would see them carried out.

On a positive side, because of the often meticulous level of planning, intervention is possible when bystanders are alert and informed. Whether an individual is planning an attack on a workplace or elsewhere, studies show certain behaviors become common and observable. These behaviors could include:

- Increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs
- Unexplained increase in absenteeism, and/or vague physical complaints
- Depression and/or withdrawal
- Increased severe mood swings, and noticeably unstable or emotional responses
- Increasingly talks of problems at home
- Increase in unsolicited comments about violence, firearms, and other dangerous weapons and violent crimes.

Staying vigilant for these warning signs among coworkers can be important for preventing a mass shooting, but not all of these incidents are perpetrated by current or former employees of a workplace. People who choose a target they do not know well will typically engage in detailed reconnaissance. Watch for individuals who:

- Loiter in areas where they observe entry or exits
- Photograph or otherwise record buildings and areas
- Ask odd questions about facilities or personnel
- Attempts to enter or access unauthorized areas
- Dress unseasonably, usually in bulky clothing for concealment of items underneath
- Carry bags or packages which seem out of place
- Seem agitated, anxious, or otherwise have a nervous demeanor when observed

Perhaps not every tragic act of violence can be stopped before it comes to fruition, but time and again, a common factor in workplace shootings is that survivors state that there were warning signs observed, but dismissed as nonsense. There is no unique profile of who is capable of this terrible act, no race, no gender, no nationality, no religion has sole claim to mass murderers, but the behavior that typically leads up to these events forms a reliable pattern. Knowledge and understanding are the key. If you see something or someone suspicious, inform your supervisors. If even one loss of life, one injury can be prevented by vigilance, then it is worth everyone's time and effort.

1. What safety problems have you observed on our jobs?

2. What job related injuries have we had since our last meeting?

3. Today's Topic:
