In my past 30 years in safety management positions, I have engaged in emergency preparedness planning for many places, plans that included response to workplace violence. While managing security during the 1990s, I recall domestic violence, a battered spouse and even a brawl in the lobby.

Fifteen years later, as a safety consultant in the role of advising clients on emergency planning, the rules and instructions provided to management and employees related to response to workplace violence require a more careful look. The shooter in the workplace is an extreme element of violence, an important risk to be considered when revisiting emergency preparedness, response and management plans. Due to the consequences, plans for response to such incidents are quite different and require some rethinking and training in the workplace.

Violence in the Workplace Statistics

Nearly 20% of all violent crime in the U.S. happens in the workplace. Statistics indicate that more than 700 workplace violence homicides occur each year. The largest number of homicides, 1,080, occurred in 1994, and the lowest number, 518, occurred in 2010. The Bureau of Justice Statistics identified that an average of 1.7 million people were victims of violent crime annually while working or on duty in the U.S. between 1993 and 1999. Most homicides in the workplace, approximately 80%, are attributed to criminal activity committed by individuals unrelated to the workplace. Other categories include violent acts:

- in the healthcare environment, primarily against caregivers, nurses, students, etc.;
- by coworkers or former employees;
- in personal relationships, such as by a spouse or partner.

During my career, I have come to rely on risk assessment measures as the basis for providing safety advice, projecting the likelihood of an event occurring and considering the consequence of such an event. A shooter in the workplace presents an extreme consequence to a largely unlikely scenario, given the large number of workplaces and the low number of incidents. However, this type of incident requires a careful review as part of the overall emergency preparedness.

What to Do?

Emergency preparedness planning has always been an important part of my work. Last year, for the first time, I began to modify plans to include “Shooter in the Workplace.” Reluctant at first, I began to realize that some people may put themselves at greater risk in a shooter situation.

For example, often reception or security personnel are trained to defuse threat situations. In some cases, company personnel may rely on the “big guy(s)” to assist with a violent situation. Guidance from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) presents a changing landscape in emergency preparedness, changes that require attention.

I offer a set of preparedness strategies for planning a response to a workplace shooter. The strategies include addressing policies, reviewing physical protection at the facility and updating site preparation for responding to a shooter situation.

Security Recommendations

- Report unauthorized persons, unusual or suspicious activities, phone calls, mailings or unknown individuals using the site emergency number and contact list.
- Ensure that the visitor control process is followed.
- Close all doors when leaving the building.
- Do not leave keys or access cards unattended.
- Report missing keys or access cards with urgency.
- Report any occurrence of workplace violence to management immediately.
- Have an escape route in mind.
- Leave belongings behind and keep your hands visible.
- Report any suspicious package via the site emergency number and contact list.
- During an emergency, when time permits, secure material before evacuating the facility.
- Do not respond to any requests for information about the company or individuals.
- Do not confront those who pose a danger to you, themselves or others.
Policies

Company management should review policies related to such an event and should be certain employees understand the policies. Ensure that employees maintain a high level of awareness regarding harassment and workplace violence policies. In the absence of clear directions, even the smallest harassment can escalate to violence.

Since I work in Pennsylvania, I reviewed available state gun law, which is largely based on licensing. In Pennsylvania, it is unlawful for any person to carry a firearm in any vehicle or concealed about the person, with many notable exceptions. Licensing does not apply in the individual’s place of abode or fixed place of business, nor does it apply to law enforcement officials, military personnel on duty or officers or employees of the U.S. duly authorized to carry a concealed firearm.

On the other hand, licensing requirements do not apply to regularly enrolled members of any organization duly organized to purchase or receive firearms from the U.S. or from Pennsylvania; agents, messengers and other employees of common carriers, banks and business firms whose duties require them to protect money, valuables and other property; or persons engaged in the manufacture, repair or dealing of firearms, in the usual and ordinary course of such business. Licensing does not apply to persons engaged in target shooting with a firearm, if the persons are at or going to or from their places of assembly or target practice and if, while going to or from their places of assembly or target practice, the firearm is not loaded.

Local rules should be reviewed for understanding. Due to the rise in crime, assault, harassment and violence in the workplace, some states have drafted and adopted legislation to protect both workers and employers against violent threats, confrontations, harassment and assault from disorderly persons. North Carolina’s Workplace Violence Prevention Act, Delaware’s Workplace Violence Policy and New York’s Duty of Public Employers to Develop and Implement Programs to Prevent Workplace Violence are a few state laws that attempt to address violence in the workplace.

All employers have a legal responsibility to provide a safe work environment, including the prevention of workplace violence to the best of their ability. Employers need to be aware they have rights to obtain restraining orders for harassment and violence in the workplace. Employers should also know how to secure a restraining order. Employers need to report the incident to police, demand that the harasser leave the workplace immediately and document all actions. Employers can request a restraining order from the responding officer and appear with the officer in court if necessary. A restraining order can be a useful tool when handling even a single documented physical or sexual assault or repeated verbal harassment involving an employee or manager.

Your employee manual can serve as a deterrent to workplace violence. Employers are within their rights to ban firearms and other weapons from the workplace, from employee lockers and break rooms and even from employee parking lots if the lots are owned by the employer. However, some local forced-entry laws bar employers from making policy against employees bringing firearms to work and leaving them in their locked
The objective of the physical security assessment in considering potential threats, incidents and losses is to identify appropriate security controls for the specific work environment.

An example of a most basic control for some businesses is to restrict entry through a doorbell intercom access system. Physical barriers can be a useful addition to an emergency preparedness program providing interruption and delay.

**How to Respond to a Shooter Situation**

DHS has developed instructions for emergency preparedness programs based on Evacuate, Hide Out and Take Action. It has also developed posters, written instructions and a training video for employers and employees, which presents several scenarios and recommended response. The instructions encourage escape and an understanding of the escape routes available to you. When not possible, barricade yourself inside rooms, turn off the lights and arm yourself with objects to use as a weapon should the intruder cross the door threshold. The instruction in general is how to survive. A shooter in the workplace will lead to extreme consequences.

Management now has the challenge of integrating the guidance that DHS has provided. Although a shooter in the workplace is an unlikely event, instructions for employees in each workplace should be developed and provided. As in all types of emergencies, the response must be based on well thought-out plans and preparedness. All employees deserve instructions for response to a shooter in the workplace situation.

I often provide emergency instructions for employees to clients. Although I am not ready to hang posters in the corridors to address this topic, I have made changes to include statements in existing security emergency instructions.

**Going Forward: Advising Clients**

These strategies equip an employer with a plan that can be presented to all employees. Having gone through this review, I am prepared to advise, and even highlight, Shooter in the Workplace response actions to clients. A thorough approach must consider the potential perpetrator, policies built on laws and rights of the employer, physical security and instructions to all employees. Investing in preparation and heightened awareness may not eliminate risks, but it will result in an alert workforce.

**Thomas F. Keelty, CSP** is the managing partner at Industrial Risk Control. He has spent more than 25 years in operations management roles, particularly in safety, within pharmaceutical research. During the past 7 years with Industrial Risk Control, he has continued to support clients in healthcare through integrated assessment, planning and training in occupational health, safety, security and environmental affairs. He provides consult in management of research facility operations. In previous roles, he has led management of facility operations encompassing these areas at Nycomed and Sterling Winthrop. He has also developed standards for global operations in security and safety practices and continues to provide consult in areas of emergency management, process safety, industrial hygiene and machine safeguarding.