

Fighting Against Violence in Health and Community Services Workplaces

Workplace violence is a complex and often misunderstood occupational hazard. And while it is present in all workplaces, workers in health and community services sector workplaces are at the highest risk of being exposed to a violent incident in the workplace. In fact, the health and community service sector is one of the most dangerous in Nova Scotia and, for that matter, all of Canada.

Before getting into the numbers, it is important to know what we mean when we use the term 'workplace violence'. Workplace violence is more than just physical assault. In fact, any action that is threatening or harmful, either physically or psychologically is considered to be violence and this includes verbal abuse, bullying, and racial and sexual harassment. Also, we need to recognize that while a majority of physical assaults on health and community services workers come from clients, patients or their family members, these workers are also at risk from co-workers, past and present.

So, how big a problem is workplace violence in Nova Scotia's health and community services sector workplaces? In 2005, the National Survey of the Work and Health of Nurses¹ found that just over 32% of direct care nurses reported being physically assaulted over the previous 12 months. The survey also found that more than 43% of these nurses reported being emotionally abused. These numbers are slightly higher than the national average. A more recent study² surveyed 415 personal care workers working in long-term care facilities in Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Ontario. Almost 90% of these workers indicated they had experienced violence at the hands of patients or family members, and 43% of them stated that they experience violence of some type almost every day.

Data from the Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia (WCB) supports the results of previous surveys. Between 2007 and 2009, over 1100 incidents of workplace violence were reported to the WCB by health and social services sector workers. This represents 65% of all violence-related cases reported to the Board for the same time period. As of March 1, 2010, the WCB had paid out more than \$1.7 million in benefits for the workplace violence claims reported by workers in the health and social services sector from 2007 – 2009.³

It is clear that workplace violence is a very real and serious problem in Nova Scotia's health and community services workplaces. The real dollar costs are huge in terms of WCB benefit payments, overtime, recruitment and replacement of staff, training administration, etc. Of greater concern, however, is the impact that workplace violence has on the health and well-being of health and community services sector workers.

Every year hundreds of care givers are victims of workplace violence in Nova Scotia. These workers experience higher rates of absenteeism, depression, anxiety, sleep disruption, sick

leave use, and job dissatisfaction, and they are more likely to leave the profession than workers who haven't been exposed to workplace violence.⁴ And workplace violence can negatively affect patient care, as studies show that the rate of medical error increases for care givers who have been abused.⁵

Fortunately, there is a great deal we can do to address and prevent workplace violence in health and community services sector workplaces. *Nova Scotia's Violence in the Workplace Regulations*⁶ require all workplaces to conduct a risk assessment for violence and, where an increased risk for workplace violence is identified, develop and implement a workplace violence prevention plan. Assessing the risk and implementing a prevention plan are necessary first steps, but they aren't enough. Organizational and physical design factors that contribute to an increased risk of workplace violence. Workers need to report all incidents of violence, with the certain knowledge that these reports will be treated seriously and respectfully.

Workplace violence is **not** 'part of the job' for Nova Scotia's health and community services sector workers. Let's all work together to fight back against workplace violence!

References

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