Building a Safe Workplace and Community

Violence Mitigation in a Culture of Safety

American Hospital Association™

Advancing Health in America

Hospitals Against Violence

Introduction

In 2021, the American Hospital Association's Hospitals Against Violence (HAV) Advisory Group developed the Building a Safe Workplace and Community framework to guide health care leaders in their efforts to mitigate workplace violence. The framework established four essential pillars of a comprehensive violence mitigation strategy: (1) culture of safety; (2) violence intervention; (3) trauma support; and (4) risk mitigation. Leadership is at the center of the framework and employs data, education, and accountability to advance these pillars. For each pillar, the Advisory Group develops an issue brief that does a deep dive into that area of focus.

This issue brief, the third of four in the series, examines how hospitals' violence mitigation efforts can fit effectively into an organization's culture of safety strategy. The brief includes thought provoking questions to facilitate discussion of how violence mitigation can be integrated seamlessly into the larger framework of patient and worker safety initiatives, supporting an overall culture of safety. It also explores strategies that leaders could take to best support a culture that mitigates violence as part of larger enterprise efforts.

Additional Framework Issue Briefs

- **Mitigating the Risk of Violence**
- **Providing Trauma Support Following an Incident or Threat of Violence**

Defining Psychological and Physical Safety

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) characterizes **psychological safety** for an individual as the feeling of expressing oneself and engaging without apprehension of detrimental repercussions to self-image, status or career.[1] For instance, a health care worker operating in a psychologically safe environment should feel comfortable engaging in quality improvement activities, learning from mistakes, as well as seeking help to address concerns related to their physical, emotional and psychological health.

At the organizational level, psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that it is acceptable to express their ideas and concerns, speak up with questions, and admit mistakes — all without fear of retribution.[2] Studies show workplaces with an environment where people feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment, or career-threatening disciplinary actions, helps lower burnout among workers and makes it easier for teams to adapt to changes. This, in turn, contributes to improved patient safety.[3]

Enhancements to physical safety can positively influence psychological safety, contributing to heightened comfort among patients and the workforce.[4] **Physical safety** refers to the protection of all stakeholders — including families, caregivers, the workforce and visitors — from violence, abuse and threats in order to create a secure environment. For example, hospitals have used metal detectors, panic buttons, built-in areas that can serve as physical barricades and duress alarms with geolocation. A comprehensive approach to promote physical safety cultivates a secure environment enabling individuals to engage, work and seek care without fear of harm.

The Why and How to Prioritize this Work

Patient safety and worker safety are interdependent. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), many of the tools, strategies and business processes used in patient safety can be effective when applied to worker safety.[5] In addition to the clear objective of enhancing patient safety and elevating the standard of care, prioritizing safety is interconnected with nurturing the mental well-being of the workforce and cultivating trust between the community and the health system.[6] Furthermore, a culture of safety stimulates teamwork and collaboration, fostering a safer environment through the promotion of open communication and trust among health care team members.[7]

Effective leadership is indispensable in driving all initiatives but particularly those related to creating and sustaining a culture of safety. Additionally, health care governance can assume a pivotal role in championing a culture of safety by promoting worker safety efforts, ensuring accountability and encouraging continuous improvement initiatives. Both effective leadership and robust governance engagement foster a workplace environment that prioritizes the well-being, psychological and physical safety of the workforce.

Applying High Reliability Organization Principles to Foster a Culture of Safety

The culture of safety concept originated outside the health care field as part of the High Reliability Organization (HRO) approach. HROs operate in complex, high-hazard domains for extended periods without serious accidents or catastrophic failures. The principles inherent to building a HRO are similar to those used in violence prevention programs as they too foster a culture of safety.

A HRO establishes a culture of safety that encompasses these key features:

- Acknowledgment of the high-risk nature of an organization's activities and the determination to achieve consistently safe operations;
- A blame-free environment where individuals can report errors or near misses without fear of reprimand or punishment;
- Encouragement of collaboration across ranks and disciplines to seek solutions to safety problems; and
- Organizational commitment of resources to address safety concerns.

Source: https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primer/culture-safety

Safety Strategies that Worked	**Changing Perceptions about Safety Event Reporting**
Advocate Health	Advocate Aurora Health, now known as Advocate Health, made event reporting a top priority by recognizing it as a strategic organizational goal. Staff developed an internal formula to standardize safety event reporting data and compare incident levels. This framework helped leaders create and follow safety objectives, further enhancing its culture. To overcome some staff's negative perceptions around safety event reporting, the health system's executive leadership consistently promoted event reporting as an opportunity to identify latent safety threats and improve patient care.

As part of promoting a culture of safety, hospitals and health systems also are working to design their physical environments to enhance safety. However, such physical safety measures, as mentioned previously, may need to be modified depending upon the type of health care setting, e.g., inpatient, outpatient, ambulatory clinic, urgent care or research. The diversity of health care settings underscores the necessity for extensive collaboration across health care teams to ensure the safety of all involved across the organization.

Health care leaders across the country are implementing new and innovative ways of **supporting the physical and mental well-being of the workforce**, particularly following violent incidents or threats. Yet, there is a disconcerting surge in the incidence of health care workers experiencing violence and threats of violence or initimdation.[8] Hospitals are working to address the immediate safety while also providing the ongoing mental health support crucial for a thriving workforce.

In addition to implementing internal solutions, health care leaders can illustrate their commitment to safety and building trust by collaborating with community partners, like local health departments, law enforcement, community health clinics, patient advocacy groups and others. Soliciting input and feedback from the community helps hospital leaders understand local needs and concerns, shaping safety strategies that are relevant and effective.[9]

Eight Components of a Culture of Safety

Creating and sustaining a vibrant culture of safety is instrumental to prevent and mitigate violence. Hospitals and health systems should aim to ensure that their broader culture of safety approach incorporates the following eight components:

1 Leadership

Leadership can demonstrate their commitment through visible actions promoting a culture of safety across the organization. Leaders should model safe behaviors and practices, such as incident reporting, in their own actions. When employees see leaders prioritizing safety, it sets a powerful example for the entire workforce. Furthermore, ensure that the organization's board is aware and supportive of the organization's culture of safety strategy.

2 Effective communication

Effective communication is essential to fostering a culture of safety. Leaders should consistently communicate the importance of safety and provide an update to workers on goals and safety initiatives. Consistent and clear communication enhances psychological safety in turn improving the individual's willingness to report incidents or threats of violence, creating a responsive environment.

Safety Strategies that Worked	**Security Measures Elevated at Norton Children's Hospital**
Norton Children's Hospital	Keeping staff safe from aggressive patients and visitors is top of mind at Louisville, Ky.-based Norton Children's Hospital. When visitor aggression increased, all staff, including physicians and security officers, were trained on verbal de-escalation strategies. A core group of individuals were also educated on nonviolent crisis intervention. Leaders minimized possible entry points, stationed security officers at locations that remained open and screened visitors more thoroughly. They also posted a pledge in all care areas to promote an environment of mutual respect and belonging. More security officers were hired, and rounding increased throughout the hospital, outdoor campus and garages.

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3 Education and training

Routinely educate and train employees on how to identify, mitigate, respond and recover from an incident of violence or the threat of violence. By providing comprehensive education, coupled with simulation training, on recognizing and de-escalating potentially volatile situations health care leaders empower their workforce to respond effectively to threats of violence.

4 Reporting and data collection

Actively promote and encourage blame-free incident reporting. Establish a robust system that not only facilitates reporting but also ensures thorough and timely follow-up on each case. This approach reinforces a commitment to accountability and creates an environment where individuals feel empowered to speak up.

5 Trust and respect

Building trust within the organization creates a supportive environment where individuals feel secure in reporting safety concerns, communicating openly and actively participating in safety initiatives. These foundational elements are crucial for nurturing a culture of safety and addressing the escalating incivility prevalent in our society.

6 Collaboration with law enforcement

Establishing a relationship with law enforcement proactively ensures a streamlined response when issues arise, fostering a collaborative approach to maintaining a safe environment. Additionally, strong collaboration with law enforcement can create a stronger deterrent against violent behavior and ensure serious incidents are properly investigated. This collaboration should include regular communication, joint training sessions and a shared understanding of each organization's core beliefs or values.

7 Partnering with community-based organizations

Strong connections with community-based organizations committed to collaborative efforts in public safety and well-being of the community are essential to achieving the shared goal of creating healthy and safe communities.

8 Health equity

Health equity and a culture of safety are interconnected principles working together to create health care environments that are inclusive, fair, and responsive to the diverse needs of individuals and communities. The integration of these principles not only promotes equal access to health care services but also ensures that safety measures are applied equitably, fostering an environment where everyone, irrespective of background or circumstance, receives care that is both safe and tailored to their unique requirements.

Safety Strategies that Worked

CHI Health

Building a Culture of Safety with Peer-to-Peer Support at CHI Health

From 2019 to 2020, Omaha, Neb.-based CHI Health reduced staff assaults resulting in injuries by 50%. A multidisciplinary leadership team worked with a workplace violence prevention expert for 18 months to complete a gap analysis of system-wide safety goals. Safety leaders used an incident reporting system to identify opportunities for improvement. By aggregating and then analyzing safety reporting data, leaders learned that acute care and emergency department staff needed de-escalation training, which the health system now provides. They have trained acute care staff to respond to assaults as a team.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to facilitate meaningful conversations within your organization.

1. How does violence prevention fit in as part of an overall effort to support a culture of safety within our organization?

2. How are we ensuring that our workforce perceives their work environment as psychologically and physically safe?

3. How do we encourage incident reporting and how do we follow-up after events to communicate to our workforce that reports are taken seriously?

4. How are we working with community-based organizations to promote a culture of safety?

5. How are we working with law enforcement?

6. What steps do we need to take to improve the organization's culture of safety components related to violence prevention and mitigation? Who will be accountable for this work?

7. How can we link this to our work to achieve health equity?

8. How can we link this to our work to enhance the mental well-being of our workforce?

9. How can we ensure that our overall efforts to prevent violence are implemented across all settings of care?

Resources

AHA Resources

- Building a Safe Workplace and Community: A Framework for Hospital and Health System Leadership

- Issue Brief: Mitigating the Risk of Violence

- Issue Brief: Providing Trauma Support to Your Workforce Following an Incident of Threat of Violence

- Boardroom Brief: How Boards Contribute to a Safe Workplace and Community

- American Organization for Nursing Leadership and Emergency Nurses Association Guiding Principles: Mitigating Violence in Health Care

- American Organization for Nursing Leadership and Emergency Nurses Association Toolkit for Mitigating Violence in the Workplace

- Creating Safer Workplaces: A guide to mitigating violence in health care settings, a collaboration between AHA and the International Association for Health Care Security and Safety

- Podcast: Codes of Conduct – An Approach to Reducing Workplace Violence

- The Patient Safety Initiative

AHA Members in Action

- Bristol Health: Leveraging Community Partnerships to Take a Stand Against Hospital Violence

- Inova Health: Utilizing Multidisciplinary Teams to Reduce Violence

- New York-Presbyterian Health: EMR Flagging and Behavioral Health Response Training Reduces Violence

- Norton Children's Hospital: Security Measures Elevated

- Advocate Aurora Health: Changing Perceptions About Safety Event Reporting

- St. Joseph's Hospital: Strict Entry Procedures

- CHI Health: Building a Culture of Safety with Peer-to-Peer Support

National Resources

- American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) – Leading a Culture of Safety: A Blueprint for Success

- Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) – Preventing Workplace Violence in Healthcare

- The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) - Violence: Occupational Hazards in Hospitals. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Institute for Healthcare Improvement – National Action Plan to Advance Patient Safety

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