

Safety Awareness for Public-Contact Employees

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Unlike sworn law enforcement officers, most public safety employees, such as parole and probation officers, truant officers, building inspectors, or social workers, do not have enforcement powers. However, these employees face similar threats to their safety because they, like law enforcement officers, often deal with individuals who have stepped across the boundaries of society's laws.

To help its county government employees who have frequent public contact, the Prince William County, Virginia, Police Department has developed a training class on safety awareness.¹ Instructors designed the class, offered as a 1-day training session at the Prince William County Criminal Justice Academy, to increase the awareness of county employees of the potentially hazardous people and situations that they can encounter while on duty.

CLASS DESIGN

The training does not cover defensive tactics. It does not advocate the use of force, teach how to use weapons, or provide self-defense techniques. Rather, instructors teach various strategies to help prepare county employees for their encounters with the public. These strategies include the use of the field interview stance (i.e., how and where to position themselves); what physical cues or body language to watch for that could indicate a potential attack; contact and cover or "safety-in-numbers" strategy (i.e., one employee talks with the subject while another ensures safety); and how employees can communicate any hazard they perceive to their coworkers so they can both react and escape from potentially hazardous situations. The instructors incorporate a combination of lectures, handouts, videos, and computer presentations into the training to keep it interesting, as well as educational.

Divided into several categories with various objectives, the training session specifically teaches employees to be wary of certain warning signs that indicate an attack may be imminent. Follow-up discussions provide methods of diffusion or escape should the employee feel the situation is becoming dangerous. The training then covers ways employees can avoid placing themselves in such potentially hazardous situations. Finally, the session teaches certain practices that employees can implement to increase their safety while interacting with county residents.

Early Warning Signs of a Potential Attack

Employees may detect some early warning signs of an attack. For example, do the subjects have a known violent background? Do they ignore authority by turning and walking away? Do they glance at a particular object or in a certain direction, perhaps toward a kitchen knife, an avenue of exit, another person, or toward another item that they may use against the employee? Are they standing with arms crossed or hands placed on hips? Perhaps, even more telling, do they clench their fists or take a defiant stance? These examples all serve as potential preassault indicators. If any occur, employees immediately should attempt to get away.

Instructors of the class also teach the participants to recognize signs that can indicate possible alcohol or other drug use, such as bloodshot eyes, unfocused vision, impaired balance, slurred speech, odor of alcohol, hallucinations, or wild or incoherent statements. Because the attitude and reaction of a person using alcohol or other drugs easily can change without warning, employees never should attempt to interview or reason with a person who may be under the influence.

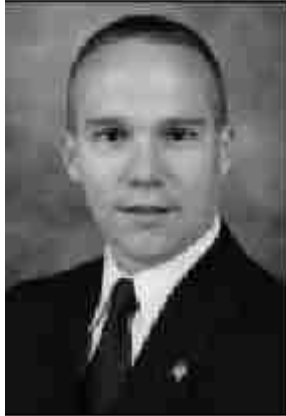
Methods of Diffusion or Escape

The ability to reduce stress during an encounter remains an important trait for employees having contact with the public. To de-escalate a situation, employees quickly must identify when someone becomes upset, begins to show signs of agitation, or reveals any warning signs and help decrease the individual's level of agitation. However, if employees believe their safety is in jeopardy, they should return later with coworkers, conduct the interview in a safer environment, or obtain police protection so that they can quickly, and safely, resume the questioning.



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Another tactic, screening, involves consciously placing barriers or objects between the employee and the interviewee. If employees conduct the interview outside, they may want to meet in a driveway where they can place the front of their cars between themselves and the subjects. When conducting interviews inside, employees can try to keep a table or desk between themselves and the subjects when conducting the interview. By creating this barrier, employees can hinder an attack and give them some time and distance to react or escape should an attack occur. If two employees attend a meeting, each employee should use available barriers. With good positioning, an attack becomes less likely because the subject cannot reach two people separated or shielded by obstacles.



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When employees determine that they need to escape, versus attempting to diffuse a situation, they must act immediately. When a threat or perceived threat has made them concerned for their immediate safety, employees should escape quickly and without explanation. They should not take time to close the interview, collect any unfinished paperwork, or pack their briefcases. They simply must exit the scene as quickly as possible.

Ways to Avoid Potential Hazards

The instructors recommend a strategy of prevention and avoidance, including identifying potentially hazardous persons or situations *before* becoming involved in the situation. Employees can accomplish this by researching any previous history of the location that they are going to, as well as the background of the persons they will meet. In doing so, employees can avoid any situation that may appear dangerous. The employees are instructed to watch for telltale signs of potential danger (e.g., loud music, an ongoing party, yelling, or a domestic dispute) as they approach their destination. Employees also should listen at the door for any signals not readily apparent from the outside. After completing these assessments and with no indicators existing, the employees can knock and announce their presence.

Identifying the type of individuals that employees face ranks as a top priority. The instructors describe individuals as either “yes,” “no,” or “maybe” type of people. How can employees tell the difference? Employees easily can identify “yes” individuals as cooperative subjects. Clearly, in the initial contact, such individuals accept employees as authority figures and comply with their directions.

Employees also easily can identify “no” people. “No” individuals make it clear from the start, whether by phone or in person, that they do not want to have any interaction with employees. They do not want to listen to employees and have no intention of cooperating with them. When encountering such individuals, employees can take numerous steps to help avoid confrontations. For example, employees simply can change the meeting place. They can tell the person that they will have to meet at a business office or building lobby, rather than in a home or secluded area. Employees can include coworkers or supervisors in the interview, based on the “safety-in-numbers” concept. Employees can call the local police if a subject becomes disorderly as it remains better to have law enforcement responding before an incident becomes an emergency. As another alternative, employees can request a police escort for the necessary contact. This proactive approach emphasizes avoiding negative contact through preparation. In the event of a physical confrontation, employees should focus their efforts on getting away and avoiding any physical contact with the individual unless in self-defense.

“Maybe” individuals can prove difficult to recognize. This type can become a “yes” or “no” person depending on the employee’s ability to communicate and deal with the situation. If in doubt, employees should treat a “maybe” person as a “no” for safety reasons, remembering that if a “maybe” person becomes a “no” person, they should leave the area. When communicating, employees should remember to talk quietly, which often forces the individual to calm down and listen to what the employee has to say. Employees can point out how others (e.g., family members) are affected by the individual’s conduct. Also, showing the individual a written policy can reassure the person that the employee is following agency procedures.

Practices to Improve Safety

The instructors tell the employees to give proper identification and introduction and to maintain a professional demeanor at all times. The class participants learn to keep a safe distance (4 to 6 feet) during contact and the importance of appearing confident and maintaining eye contact. Also, the instructors emphasize that employees should avoid becoming too involved in completing paperwork and possibly missing any type of warning signs.

The training also emphasizes that all public-contact employees should plan what they will do when a dangerous situation occurs. If they remain prepared, it will take them less time to react to such an occurrence. As employees approach each location, they should remain alert and observe the surroundings for the closest escape routes, available barriers or obstacles, any presence of weapons, and the location of the nearest telephone. Should the need arise, having a predetermined plan will help them move quickly and easily execute their plan. Employees can use simple, effective techniques to help get themselves out of danger. For example, employees can say phrases, such as “I just got a page,” “I have to check in with my boss,” or “My coworkers should be arriving soon and I need to let them know...” to allow them to use the telephone. If employees can reach a telephone, rather than calling their office in an emergency, the instructors tell them to call the police emergency number. If needed, employees can conduct a fake conversation with the dispatcher to signal that a problem exists. Employees should remember that if they use a cellular telephone to place the call, the emergency service cannot identify their location. Keeping an open phone line may help the dispatcher locate employees if they cannot provide their exact whereabouts. Employees should inform other coworkers of their schedule and location each day. The instructors stress that employees must remain vigilant of their safety, and they must be ready to use any tool, plan, or scheme to get them out of a dangerous environment and notify police, if necessary.

Such tactics also can apply when employees are working at their offices. Personal safety in the workplace involves several risk factors, including exchanging money with the public and working alone or in small numbers, before or after normal business hours, and in high-crime areas. When money is present, the risk of potential violence increases. Employees must remain aware of the risk and take steps to minimize the “obviousness” of cash by limiting the amount of personal property they bring into the workplace; securing valuables in a locked drawer or in the trunk of their vehicles; and keeping purses, wallets, and valuables out of sight. Because employees face greater danger before and after normal working hours and in high-crime areas, they should employ recognized safety practices, such as parking near the door in well-lighted areas, scanning the area prior to entering or leaving buildings, calling home prior to leaving, not advertising that they are working alone, locking their office doors, leaving in teams whenever possible, and walking with purpose and exuding confidence. Visitors to the workplace also present dangers. Employees should ensure that their office has a policy for identifying authorized visitors, such as displaying an approved visitor badge, and that a policy exists to report and handle unauthorized persons.

Finally, because a person’s level of confidence may decrease the chance of being victimized or increase the chance of survival should an attack occur, the instructors also emphasize the importance of physical fitness. Employees should strive to maintain a level of fitness to increase their health, which could help project a higher level of confidence to a person who may be thinking about possibly attempting an assault. They should attain fitness gradually and should initiate any fitness program only after consulting with a

doctor if any health concerns exist. In addition, should an escape or defense become necessary, being physically fit will increase the level of their performance in what may be a dynamic situation.

CONCLUSION

While many public-contact employees do not have enforcement powers, they do meet individuals who often take umbrage with them while they are carrying out their assigned duties. To avoid possible confrontations and increase their level of safety, these employees should receive training in how to recognize and deal effectively with these types of individuals.

The Prince William County, Virginia, Police Department has developed a 1-day training session to provide its county government employees who have frequent public contact with strategies that can help them deal with potentially dangerous incidents. Although no employee can predict when, or if, a situation will “go bad” for them, by thinking ahead, having a well-thought-out plan, and rehearsing it, they can improve their chances of surviving a dangerous situation or, ideally, even preventing such an attack.

Endnote

¹ For additional information on the program, contact Chief C.T. Deane, Prince William County, Virginia, Police Department at 703-792-6650.

Early Warning Signs of a Potential Attack

Conspicuous ignoring: As employees talk, subjects give no sign of understanding the conversation or dialogue. They avoid eye contact and will not answer questions. They may ignore facts specifically pointed out to them. They may be formulating their plan of attack or withdrawal.

Repetitive inquiries: Individuals will keep repeating the question posed by employees, even after having been provided a satisfactory response, to help buy time to formulate a lie or develop a plan of attack.

Looking around: Subjects may be attempting to find a way out of the situation. In their minds, the employees are the ones who placed them there and made them feel this level of discomfort. This is different than target glancing in that their heads swivel to find “any way out,” including through the employees.

- **Exaggerated pacing:** This speaks to their level of agitation and could indicate that they

are warming up for a withdrawal or an attack.

Ceasing all movement: This is the reverse of exaggerated pacing and is better known as “the calm before the storm,” but possibly could indicate some type of action by the subject.

Actual threats: Employees should take these seriously. They should not minimize actual statements or threats made by subjects. They should take such subjects at their words or actions and respond appropriately. They also should document the threat.

- **Flight versus fight:** Because it remains difficult to tell whether any of these actions are made in an attempt to withdraw or as a precursor of an attack, it is only prudent to assume that they may be indicating a possible attack and to react accordingly. It is not worth the employee’s safety to risk not responding.