

## Workplace Security

**V**iolence encroaches on our lives with increasing frequency. Indiscriminate violence has infiltrated workplaces in the form of such acts as robberies and aggression from disgruntled customers or former coworkers. Accordingly, veterinary staff should take reasonable precautions to prevent a violent or dangerous workplace situation.

Common characteristics of veterinary practices increase the risk of threats or workplace violence. These include:

- Agitated or disgruntled clients
- Exchange of money
- Working alone at night and during early morning hours
- Availability of valued items, i.e. cash, drugs, and medical equipment

### Disgruntled Clients

Often emotions are running high with clients at veterinary practices. Frequent scenarios involve clients being separated from their pets, pets having serious medical conditions, pets dying, and unexpected financial obligations. Any of these can be a trigger and escalate client emotions and behaviors. How can we prevent or de-escalate a volatile interaction? Here are a few things you can do when faced with an agitated or disgruntled client:

- Thoroughly describe protocols to clients before and at the start of each visit to eliminate any surprises.
- Listen to and acknowledge the pet owner's concerns. Sometimes owners just want to be heard.
- Include a coworker in difficult conversations. Two team members sending the same message helps defuse the situation.
- Excuse yourself and walk away if the client yells or uses abusive language. Call for backup.
- If necessary, ask the client to leave, use the panic button, or call the police.

### Robberies

Cash, drugs, and valuable medical equipment make veterinary practices susceptible to robberies. Robbery deterrence and security measures include:

- Assessing the physical security of the practice inside and out. What additional protection is needed? Have all staff members' security concerns been addressed?
- Locking the front door after dark and keeping all other doors locked at all times.
- Installing video surveillance inside and outside the practice.
- Installing an alarm system that includes an employee panic button.
- Ensuring the parking lot is well lit, especially where employees leave their cars.

- Having a buddy system for employees inside the practice and when they leave at night.
- Maintaining exterior landscaping to remove hiding spots.

If you are present at the practice during a robbery, do not resist, and give the perpetrators what they demand. Do not chase after the person. Write down a description of the person and get a license plate number, then call 9-1-1. Remember, you and your staff are a practice's most valuable asset; anything else can be replaced!

### Other Threats

Coworkers, ex-coworkers, coworkers' family members, and/or the public can also pose a threat. It is important to be familiar with the practice's plan to deal with these potential threats. Management should be notified if at-work safety is a concern, especially if the situation involves a restraining order or threats of violence. Inform the team when an employee has resigned or been let go, and report verbally abusive or threatening behavior immediately.

Always include:

1. Who said/did what to whom?
2. What exactly happened?
3. Where did the incident happen?
4. When did the incident occur?

Whenever possible, obtain witness corroboration as to all of the above.

### Getting a Workplace Security Program Started

When getting started, seek involvement from all staff and promote communication. Everyone should feel that it's okay to express themselves regarding workplace violence. Workplace security programs extend beyond the mandated Injury and Illness Prevention (IIP) Program intended to protect employees from job hazards. Like the IIP Program, a workplace security program relies on:

- Developing and communicating policies and procedures.
- Assigning administrator responsibilities.
- Educating employees about the workplace security program, including training on the warning signs of violence and how to report suspicious behavior.
- Promoting awareness through regular communication.
- Providing response training to threats or acts of violence. Managers, supervisors, and employees need training to recognize and respond to potentially violent situations.

Using a little caution can go a long way to protecting you and coworkers from potentially dangerous situations. ■