



Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

Physical and verbal abuse at work: When the perpetrator is the client

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In September 2014, a masked gunman walked into the Work and Income offices in Ashburton, and killed two staff members. The gunman was a client of that office who had previously had issues with staff.

This tragedy shocked those working in the public sector, particularly those working in frontline, client service positions. In particular, it raised the issue of the safety and security of frontline staff who deal with vulnerable and stressed clients. The Minister for Social Development, Paula Bennett, ordered an urgent independent review of security for frontline offices. The Ministry of Social Development (MSD), set up an external group to review of security for frontline offices. The NZ Public Service Association (PSA) both lent support to employees after the Ashburton tragedy, and provided support to MSD with its review of the tragedy. Among the recommendations from the review were more security guards, more controlled access to buildings and more awareness of the need to identify clients at risk.

MSD subsequently pleaded guilty to 'failing to take all practicable steps' and the Judge concluded that 'the chance of client-initiated violence was predictable'. A physical barrier 'to delay a client who was attempting to assault and employee' would have been helpful.

Client violence does happen to frontline staff, and it does not only happen in New Zealand. Late in 2016, for instance, a man shot a lawyer who had previously represented him in a court case in Miami, US.

Following on from increased awareness of client abuse, two questions focused on this issue were included in the 2016 Workplace Dynamics survey. The survey, commissioned by the PSA to the Centre for Labour, Employment and Work at Victoria University of Wellington, and including 14,125 PSA members, questioned participants about the frequency in which they had been 1) physically and 2) verbally abused by clients in the previous year. While 5.1% of the participants pointed out that they had been physically abused at least every six months, almost nine times this percentage (43.4%) reported they had been verbally abused in the same timeframe.

This is unfortunate, as workplace abuse is positively related to anxiety, depression, burnout, frustration, deviance and physical symptoms; and negatively related to self-esteem, and job and life satisfaction (Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

Contact or call-centre workers, inspection or regulation workers, machinery operators and drivers, managers, registered social professionals and unregistered service workers were particularly at risk. Members working in public service departments, district health boards, local government bodies and community public service organisations were all at risk of verbal abuse by clients.

Unfortunately, those that had experienced verbal abuse perceived significantly less organisational support, and for their organisations to be less active in making sure they were psychologically healthy. Managers were rated as more 'laissez-faire', and less responsive and constructive in their leadership behaviours.

These analyses show that as well as physical safety through guards and secure barriers, organisational leadership, along with climate and culture within the organisation are also important. If the environment outside frontline staff offices is not always manageable, the internal environment is generally more manageable. Organisations need to ensure managers are responsive to employees and 'there' for employee's needs, which would include support to employees on occasions in which they feel abused by clients. Systems also need to be in place to assist employees to 'debrief' and report incidents in which they experienced verbal and/or physical abuse, and organisations need to have clear systems for dealing with reports.

References

Bowling, N. A., & Beehr, T. A. (2006). Workplace harassment from the victim's perspective: A theoretical model and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 998–1012.

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