

EVALUATION REPORT – Workplace Violence Prevention Program

June 2000

Introduction

In October 1998, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) implemented a Workplace Violence (WPV)¹ Prevention Program to decrease the incidents of violence in the workplace of all FSIS employees. Workplace violence is defined as any type of violence, threat, intimidation or other disruptive behavior in the workplace.² This evaluation assessed the Agency's policies and procedures for preventing and remedying violence in the workplace.

A survey was administered to approximately 1300 employees across the Agency. (*See Attachment 1*). In addition, a small number of telephone interviews were conducted with supervisory and non-supervisory personnel who had reported a situation to the Workplace Violence Hotline. Approximately 416 respondents provided feedback on current policies, information on personal experiences, and recommendations for prevention of violence in the workplace.

Major Findings

The following is a summary of key points from the evaluation.

- Almost all respondents were aware of the Agency's WPV Prevention Program and feel safe at work.
- Most all respondents read and found useful both the *Workplace Violence Policy Statement* and *Preventing Workplace Violence Guide*. However, confusion exists about the definition of workplace violence. Many were uncertain if acts of intimidation, improper jokes and disruptive behaviors are examples of violence.
- WPV situations range from the relatively straight forward incident (e.g., an employee hitting someone) to complex interactions over a period of time that require a more thorough investigation by the WPV Program Assessment Team³. The most complex cases often involve accusations by third parties, by inspectors of plant employee intimidation or personal threats, or by plant management of inspector harassment.
- Nearly one-third of respondents experienced some type of WPV incident of which the majority of cases were reported prior to the October 1998 implementation of the WPV Prevention Program. Respondents were approximately divided in their satisfaction of the handling of their WPV incident both prior to and after October 1998.

¹ WPV is the acronym created by the Workplace Violence Work Group.

² For more information, see *Preventing Workplace Violence, A Guide for FSIS Employees*, Food Safety and Inspection Service, February 1999.

³ A team of Agency employees assigned to investigate each WPV incident reported; bringing together all parties involved and resolving the situation to everyone's satisfaction.

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- Supervisors who were interviewed felt very positive about how cases they reported were handled.
- Respondents expressed concern about intimidation and retaliation from industry employees. A few employees commented that whenever a plant employee is fired as a result of a complaint from inspection personnel, inspection personnel are blamed and targeted for retaliation.
- Respondents stated that their immediate supervisors do not take the WPV program seriously. Cases go unresolved when disciplinary action is required by supervisory personnel to solve the problem.
- Respondents were particularly disturbed that Agency management appeared wary of employee motivation for reporting a WPV incident and questioned their purpose.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were voiced by interviewers, noted by survey respondents, or developed from review of WPV materials. Recommendations are grouped into three areas:

Communication

- Introduce members of the WPV Assessment Team to Agency employees during staff meetings, work unit meetings, all employee meetings, etc. These personal interactions would allow employees to place faces with the names that are often referred to as contact persons. Discussions could cover a variety of WPV topics and relevant materials could be distributed.
- Publicize that an individual from the WPV Program Assessment Team has been designated to serve as contact for all offices (as stated in the guide, *Preventing Workplace Violence*).
- Reinforce the program by sending WPV awareness messages via Outlook on a regular basis. Announce helpful hints, name and telephone number of contact person, upcoming training, tips for staff meetings, role-playing exercises, or a one-pager⁴ about WPV on a quarterly basis.
- Review the following directives that relate to WPV and determine if it is possible to condense into one directive that addresses all aspects of WPV:
 - ✓ FSIS Directive 4735.3, Employee Responsibilities and Conduct
 - ✓ FSIS Directive 4735.4, Reporting Assaults, Threats, Intimidation, or Interference
 - ✓ FSIS Directive 4735.7, Industry Accusations Against Inspection Personnel.

At a minimum, eliminate areas of confusion, conflicting information and duplication.

⁴ An example of an excellent one-pager is *Preventing Workplace Violence*, Lean Trimmings, National Meat Association, August 9, 1999, that was shared to the Leader of the WPV Work Group during the course of this evaluation.

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- Provide each FSIS office with copy of the *Preventing Workplace Violence Policy Statement and Preventing Workplace Violence Guide*. This information should be posted in every FSIS office along with the directives listed above that also relate to WPV.
- Provide WPV materials to industry to help raise awareness and prevent incidents; the majority of incidents involve plant employees.

Training

- Cover WPV issues at work unit meetings in the field. Topics might include awareness training, useful ways to avoid potential conflicts, methods for addressing incidents, and ways to correct situations. Role playing with inspection program personnel would be ideal. Quizzes would provide individuals with information about their own level of awareness. Use real-life examples to increase relevance. Share stories and experiences including corrective actions on WPV situations.
- Train employees using interactive workshops and seminars. Most respondents stated that on site training was more effective than written materials.
- Provide separate training for supervisors on how to prevent and handle WPV situations that occur amongst their subordinates.⁵ Mandatory regularly scheduled training was cited to help supervisors identify and appropriately handle the wide variety of WPV situations. Good communication skills could prevent or defuse a potential WPV situation.

Agency Policy

- Conduct a thorough background check before hiring new employees to identify persons with a history of violence.
- Clarify Agency policy and written guidance on how to handle third party accusations⁶.
- Require supervisors to review plant security procedures, especially for night shift inspection personnel. Provide cellular telephones to employees working in risk areas.
- Address concerns of inspection personnel who believe that supervisory personnel are supporting plant management decisions, and inspectors involved in personal relationships with plant employees are receiving special treatment from plant personnel. As often as possible, rotate personnel to avoid attachment to plant management.

⁵ A self-instruction guide for FSIS Supervisors on WPV Prevention was distributed in March 2000 to all supervisors.

⁶ Third party accusations are cases reported by individuals other than those directly involved in the incident.