

## Employers take steps to prevent workplace violence

# Prevention of threats, harassment and physical assaults becomes high priority in the workplace

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A former employee at a Baltimore County automotive repair shop lurked nearby in the days after his firing last year, watching the comings and goings from across the street. Employees feared that he was plotting revenge.

What the ex-employee didn't know was that he, too, was being watched.

Philip Deming, a consultant in workplace violence prevention, had set up a "counter surveillance" operation. Deming had been called by the small company's president to intervene after spotting the man outside and being told by employees that he had been out there for days.

The disgruntled employee apparently made threats against the company and was eventually arrested on weapons charges, preventing what could have been an explosive situation in the workplace, according to Deming, who declined to identify the company, citing client confidentiality.

Workplace violence prevention efforts and policies have become more commonplace, much as sexual harassment training has become an integral part of doing business. More employers, including many prominent businesses in Maryland, are taking steps to thwart a range of threatening acts — such as harassment, bullying, stalking and physical assaults — by hiring consultants like Deming and implementing protocols.

That greater awareness and intervention may have contributed to a decline in the mass shootings that captured headlines in the late 1980s and early 1990s, workplace experts believe. Homicides in workplaces have fallen 52 percent to 526 in 2008 since reaching a high of 1,080 in 1994, according to U.S. Department of Labor statistics released in April.

Still, about 2 million U.S. workers each year are victims of some kind of workplace assault, according to frequently cited statistics from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration reports. And most workplaces in the U.S. — 70 percent — do not have either a formal program or policy in place to address the problem, a study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health found.

"Workplace violence is something a lot of employers don't like to talk about, because of the 'It can't happen here' mentality," Deming said. "People don't want to believe it can happen, and if someone does act out, it is viewed as a personal problem that should be handled outside the workplace."

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