

Workplace Violence Training Program: Receptionists

Start Session with Fatality Report

First ask your trainees to talk about their safety and security concerns. Then relay this true story.

A security guard working at a FedEx Ground distribution center near Washington, DC, was found shot dead. The victim, Reina N. Lynch, 26, was a school bus driver and mother of two. She had taken on the security job to make ends meet. A co-worker arriving for the day shift discovered Lynch lying on the ground by her guard booth at the entry gate.

Police received a tip pointing to 40-year-old Fabian Shim, father of Lynch's seven-year-old child. Lynch might have become pregnant a second time by Shim, although he was engaged to another woman, and he and Lynch were having a child support court battle.

Security films showed a black BMW similar to Shim's pulling up to the security booth, and a man getting out and later returning. That man was the only visitor to the complex that night. Lynch was conscientious, her boss said, and wouldn't have opened the secured booth to anyone she did not know. Shim was arrested and charged with first-degree murder.

Deliver This Safety Talk

Receptionists and front desk workers are responsible for greeting and directing workplace visitors. Their courteous manner and prompt service are important to the company's public image and reputation with customers. These workers also have an important part to play in the security and safety of their company and fellow workers.

This front desk job varies depending on the workplace. These duties may be carried out by the front gate guard, office receptionist, retail clerk, hospitality server, a warehouse worker taking a turn at the front counter, an admissions nurse, or a lobby security monitor. The role also includes lunch break relief personnel.

In each of these jobs, the worker is the first to observe and interact with the people coming in. They see customers, clients, patients, vendors and delivery persons. They might also face robbers, people planning an assault, angry customers, and intoxicated people wandering in off the street.

As well, they may have to deal with irate and abusive callers, pranks, and threats, including bomb threats.

Here are ways you can protect yourself against these hazards.

If you're working in a secured zone, respect it. Don't open a door or gate for anyone, no matter who, unless they're there for work purposes. If personal friends stop by, tell them "I'm working. I'll see you later."

If your job includes front desk duties, make sure your training covers procedures for dealing with visitors who make threats or bypass your desk.

Many problems can be averted by acknowledging all visitors upon arrival, even if you don't have time to wait on them. Make eye contact and say you will be with them shortly.

If someone tries to duck under a gate or around your station, ask them to wait speaking in a clear and firm voice. If you have a system of signing in visitors, ensure that they also sign out so to ensure an accurate accounting of people in the building in case of an emergency evacuation. It may be your job to issue personal protective equipment (PPE) to visitors being escorted into hazardous work areas.

You should also keep a list of emergency numbers at your workstation so you can readily contact security personnel, police, and other emergency responders. A copy of planned evacuation routes should also be posted at the front desk or entry point to help emergency responders account for the people in the building.

Talk to your supervisor or your company's safety and security office about helping you set up checklists for use in a crisis. If a call is a bomb threat, you can grab your checklist and make note of what the caller says and any identifying sounds to help investigators find the bomb and catch the caller.

Also talk to your supervisor about assigning a backup person to help if you sense a threat. You'll need a signal to alert this person, such as a code word or a silent alarm.

Some callers and visitors may try to obtain confidential information about employees or the company. If you're in doubt about what to say or don't want to be rushed into saying the wrong thing, make a list of the requests and promise to call the person back. Then check with your supervisor.

If you work alone, arrange to check in with your co-workers or boss every half-hour or so. If you're going somewhere, or someone approaches you, let a coworker or supervisor know.

Final Word

Work with your company in developing policies and procedures for front desk security challenges. Then you can handle them calmly, confidently, and competently.