



## Key Strategies for Protecting Employees from Active Shooters in the Workplace

By Linda Otaigbe and Nickole Winnett  
Credit: Jackson Lewis P.C.



It seems lately as though an individual cannot turn on the television, read the newspaper or “surf the web” without stumbling across another tragic active shooter event in the news. Active shooter events — while still very rare — have risen dramatically in the United States in recent years, and some have occurred in the workplace. To allay the concerns of employees and visitors, employers may want to consider developing active shooter policies and procedures. This article discusses four key strategies that should be contained in such policies and procedures.

### Defining ‘Active Shooter’

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines an active shooter as an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area. In most cases, active shooters use firearms and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims. From 2000 to 2006, such incidents averaged 6.4 annually but from 2007 to 2013, such incidents jumped to an average of 16.4 a year. Some of these incidents occur in the workplace, which, tragically, result in the death or serious injury of employees, and many others occur in schools, churches or public places that we typically deem safe.

### Developing Policies and Procedures

Although not required by a specific federal law, employers should consider developing policies and procedures to protect their employees and visitors during these rare, but highly dangerous occurrences. The procedures should contain information on:

- how communications will be made of an active shooter event;

- how employees can raise complaints or concerns if potential warning signs in others are identified;
- how those complaints will be investigated; and
- how to handle the emotional toll that an event can take on staff.

Employers also should develop [policies and procedures](#) on how employees can respond to an active shooter. Having a plan to handle active shooters will prepare staff to act quickly in a fast-moving situation — which will likely last no more than 10 to 15 minutes and be over before police arrive. Studies show that trained employees act, whereas untrained employees are more likely to experience panic or disbelief that puts them in harm’s way.

Here are the four key strategies for protecting employees from active shooters: (1) teach employees how to respond — run, hide, fight; (2) create a threat response team; (3) identify risks and conduct a security facility analysis; and (4) coordinate with local law enforcement.

### Teach Employees How to Respond — Run, Hide, Fight

The Federal Emergency Management Administration’s and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s current model for responding to active shooters, is to run, hide and fight, in that order. Instructing staff to follow this model is the best way to maximize their safety, especially against an individual intent on causing mass casualties. Employees should receive training annually on how to recognize and respond to an active shooter event. The FBI’s [Run. Hide. Fight. Surviving an Active Shooter Event video](#) is an excellent resource that employers can use.

Prior to the occurrence of an active shooter event, employers should encourage all employees to assess their

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work areas and consider how to respond in the event of an active shooter. In that regard, employees should consider the closest route to evacuate and what route they would take in the event that the primary route is unavailable or blocked. Employees also should consider where appropriate hiding locations are within the facility and what equipment or materials could be used as a weapon if fighting becomes necessary.

In the event of an active shooter scenario, employees should first attempt to evacuate the building and move to a safe location, if possible, and then call 911. When contacting emergency personnel, employees should offer as much information as possible about the location of the active shooter, the number of shooters and the physical description of the shooter(s), if known. This information is helpful in helping law enforcement respond. Employees also should prevent others from entering the building and inform them of the emergency situation and the need to move to a safe location.

If employees are unable to evacuate, then they should attempt to find a secure location to hide. Employees should choose locations that will provide as much cover and protection as possible. They should lock and tie down the door, if possible, using belts, purse straps, shoe laces, etc. and barricade the door with anything available, such as desks, chairs or cabinets. Employees should silence cell phones, turn off all lights and remain quiet. Moreover, they should put themselves in a position to surprise the active shooter should they enter the room, while remaining quiet and hidden until authorities have given the “All Clear.”

If an active shooter confronts an employee and his or her life or the lives of others is immediately threatened, employees should fight, if possible. In this circumstance, employees should use any and all items available as a weapon, including scissors, phones, lamps, staples, fire extinguishers, car keys, or even a pen. They should attack the eyes, throat, nose and head of the active shooter and not stop attacking until the shooter is no longer a threat. Remember that an active shooter is intent on killing, and fighting is the last resort to saving lives.

Drills may be an effective way to validate and evaluate your run, hide, fight plan for effectiveness. Be sure, however, to let employees know that a drill is occurring and not an actual active shooter situation. Misunderstandings can take an emotional and physical toll on employees, negating the benefits of the training and leading to possible lawsuits.

## **Create a Threat Response Team**

Employers should create a Threat Response Team — a group of management and non-management team members — to assist local law enforcement and implement the company’s emergency response protocols during an active shooter event, and train employees on the run, hide, fight protocols. These individuals should be responsible for: (1) providing information to local law enforcement about the facility during an event; (2) tending to the wounded before emergency services arrive; (3) completing a head count of employees and staff that evacuated; and (4) notifying law enforcement of missing or unreported individuals. In preparing for a shooter event, the Threat Response Team should consider putting together a toolkit of important items, such as copies of a facility map, a master key/master badge to allow local law enforcement access to the entire facility, a list of employees’ emergency contact information and a first-aid kit.

Employers also should ensure that the Threat Response Team reviews or becomes aware of all workplace violence complaints or concerns filed and assists in investigating those complaints and concerns. By having a centralized team of individuals involved in receiving and investigating all complaints, patterns of behavior may be discovered before an active shooter event occurs, giving employers the possibility of thwarting an attack before it happens.

## **Identify Risks and Conduct a Security Facility Analysis**

In many instances, active shooters will talk about their intentions or engage in other troubling behavior, such as drawing violent situations, sharing a “dream” they had about doing harm to others, posting threatening or troubling social media statuses, etc. Thus, employers should be watchful for incidents that involve threatening remarks or gestures, whether direct or vague; physical harm or injury to another person, whether in or out of work; demonstrated aggressive or hostile behavior; intentional destruction of property; self-destructive behavior; and/or talk of violence. While these examples may be more readily observable, employers also should be mindful of drastic changes in employee performance; expression of irrational beliefs; signs of depression, despair, or paranoia; and/or changes in personal habits/hygiene. As can be imagined, these signs or potential risks are often difficult to spot or identify and they do not always mean that a worker will become violent, which makes decisions on how to handle employees who exhibits these signs difficult. Employers should instruct employees on how to recognize behavioral indicators of potential violence and on

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the methods for reporting any troubling and concerning behavior they witness in others.

In addition to recognizing the potential signs of violence, employers also should conduct an initial and an annual security and workplace violence assessment. The assessment should review areas in which people work, whether the public has access to those areas, and whether certain physical changes or engineering and administrative controls should be implemented to reduce employee vulnerability to an active shooter event.

In the instance of terminated or laid-off employees, employers also should consider developing protocols and procedures for increasing security, especially for those who have exhibited potential warning signs, including ensuring that the employee no longer has access to the building or a reason to return (that is, to return equipment or uniforms) and notifying security or the receptionist that an individual is no longer allowed on facility property and what steps should be taken if discovered trespassing.

### Coordinate with Local Law Enforcement

Many local law enforcement offices have special units trained on responding to an active shooter event. Employers should meet with these units to discuss the effectiveness of the company's response protocols and seek feedback and recommendations on how best to respond to an active shooter event. Early coordination with local law enforcement — before an event — can create a timelier

and more effective response to a shooting event and a better working relationship with those who will respond. The more that law enforcement understands ahead of time, the more quickly they can respond and the more lives they can save.

### Conclusion

While an employer may not be able to prevent an incident from occurring, statistics show that the more prepared one is for such an event, the better chance of survival. ❖

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