

# **Managing Workplace Violence and Threatening Behaviour Policy and Procedure**

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**WORKSAFE**  
NEW ZEALAND | MAHI HAUMARU  
AOTEAROA



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## DOCUMENT CONTROL

### Version history

Date	Version	Author	Description of change

### Approved by

Name	Role	Date	Signature

## **WORKPLACE VIOLENCE POLICY**

### **Purpose**

This policy outlines WorkSafe New Zealand's (NZ) approach to preventing workers' exposure to violence and if prevention is not possible, how to manage the risk of violence or potential violence.

### **Scope**

Violence is defined as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This can include verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Examples of violence include: intimidation; threatening or abusive language; posturing; physical threats; physical and potential weapons such as dogs. In general, a worker's own sense of threat in relation to others' actions or words defines what counts as violence.

Violence includes violence from other workers, visitors to our place of work, and external contacts with whom we must engage as part of our work. WorkSafe NZ's response to violence perpetrated by an employee against another worker will be covered by WorkSafe NZ's disciplinary procedures.

This policy covers two different work environments, the managed environment of an office and the more dynamic situation at an external work site.

### **Policy Statements**

#### **WorkSafe New Zealand:**

- Is committed to preventing all forms of violence at work, wherever that place of work may be.
- Considers that violence or potential violence in any form against our workers is unacceptable.
- Has a low threshold for what constitutes violence towards its workers.
- Acknowledges that its workers' place of work can be across multiple environments including workplaces that are also other people's homes and workplaces.
- Understands that its expanded regulatory role and profile may increase the possibility of negative reactions to the increased scrutiny of our Inspectorate.
- Supports workers to recognise violent acts when they happen and empowers them to respond appropriately.

**WorkSafe New Zealand will:**

- Recognise and manage violence or potential violence as a hazard for WorkSafe NZ's workers .
- Report all potential criminal acts to the Police. These include threats and actual physical assaults.
- Provide de-escalation (tactical communication) training for all new workers prior to commencing external contact work.
- Provide regular refresher de-escalation (tactical communication) training to all existing workers who are required to undertake external contact work .
- Ensure all managers have the training and skills to support their teams to plan, monitor and review their site visits to prevent, isolate, and minimise violence.
- Ensure that the physical arrangement of its interview rooms and public areas minimise the potential for its workers to be exposed to violence.
- Investigate as such violence which may constitute "obstruction of an Inspector" .
- Develop and maintain procedures and guidelines to facilitate implementation of this policy.

**Related Policies and Procedures**

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following procedures:

- Health and Safety Management Policy for WorkSafe NZ Workers
- Hazard Management Procedure
- Incident Reporting, Recording and Investigation Procedure
- De-escalation training and techniques (tactical communication)
- Preventing and Managing Violence Guidelines
- Planning field visits (pre-contact planning, developing a safety management plan, 5 step checklist)

**Relevant Legislation**

Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992

**Key Accountabilities and Responsibilities**

**Ownership**

This policy is owned by the General Manager Human Resources who is responsible for oversight of policy implementation and continuous improvement.

**Managers**

All managers have a responsibility to ensure their workers have the training, resources and support outlined in this policy and associated procedures and guidelines.

**Workers**

All workers have a responsibility to ensure they are conversant with these policies and procedures and take the necessary steps to prevent and/or minimise the risk of violence or potential violence at their place of work.

**Measures**

This policy will be monitored and reviewed as part of the evaluative monitoring framework for WorkSafe NZ's internal health and safety policies.

**Help**

For further information contact [internalhealthandsafety@worksafe.govt.nz](mailto:internalhealthandsafety@worksafe.govt.nz)

## **Managing Workplace Violence and Threatening Behaviour Procedure**

### **Purpose**

These procedures and guidelines support the implementation of WorkSafe New Zealand's (NZ) Violence Policy.

### **Scope**

Violence has been identified as a workplace hazard with potentially high consequences.

These procedures and guidelines provide both mandatory and recommended controls to support the prevention and management of violence and threatening behaviour incidents.

### **Definitions**

#### **Violence and Threatening Behaviour**

Violence is defined as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This can include verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Examples of violence include: intimidation; threatening or abusive language; posturing; physical threats; physical assault and potential weapons such as dogs. In general, a worker's own sense of threat in relation to others' actions or words defines what counts as violence.

#### **Escalation**

Escalation is the change from someone who is dissatisfied or upset into a situation that is aggressive or violent.

#### **De-Escalation**

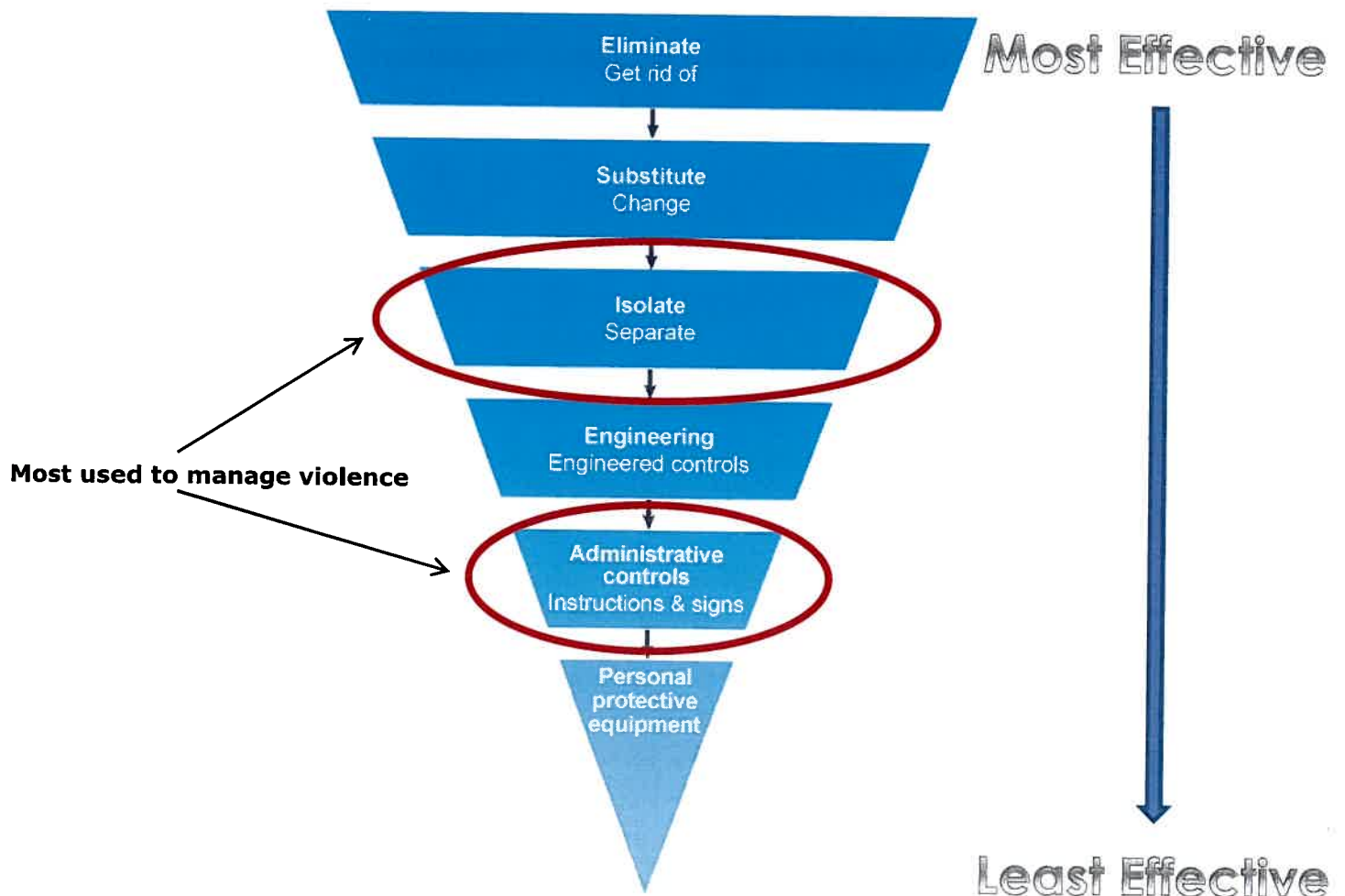
De-escalation refers to the techniques used to calm down someone who has started to become angry.

#### **Dis-Engagement**

Dis-engagement means terminating the visit or interview and leaving the scene.

#### **Violence as a Hazard**

The Health and Safety in Employment Act (1992) requires that significant hazards must be eliminated. If this is not possible then they must be isolated. If they cannot be isolated they must be minimised and monitored. This is achieved by using the hierarchy of control methodology.



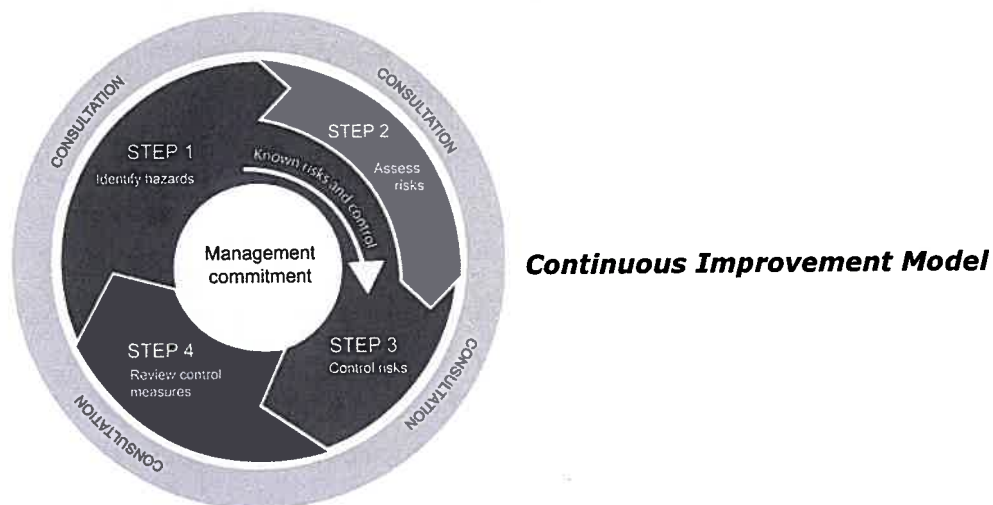
Both office and field based violence and threatening behaviour can be managed using the same methods. Field based violence and threatening behaviour may be more dynamic due to the uncontrolled environment.

Workplace violence and threatening behaviour should be managed using the continuous improvement model.

- 1. Identify the risk** - The risks for violence and aggression during an initial assessment with a new client, a task or activity.
- 2. Assess the risk** - The risk, its likelihood of occurring, and when it does occur what is the consequence i.e. what injury can occur to the person. You should then come up with a risk ranking.
- 3. Control the risk** - Once you have completed the assessment, you need to identify controls or measures to either eliminate the risk or reduce it to as low as reasonably practicable.



- 4. Maintain and review** – Controls and procedures in working with clients where violence or aggression is a component.



Violent situations involving WorkSafe NZ workers and clients do not usually “just happen”. They often follow a pattern of escalating aggression:

- Annoyance;
- Raised voice;
- Verbal threats,
- Physical gestures;
- Actual physical violence.

**Step 1 - Hazard identification** - look for the hazards in your workplace:

There are a number of ways to identify workplace violence. Prior to commencing any task a Take 5 risk assessment should be conducted. This personal risk assessment checklist will help you to identify the hazards before you start. This includes:

- STOP – step back, observe
- THINK – identify hazards - warning signs
- CONTROL – how can you control the identified hazards?

**Step 2 - Risk assessment** - work out how serious your problems might be:

The next step is to assess risk associated with each hazard. The purpose is to determine:

- Which of the identified hazards is most likely to occur;
- What are the likely injuries that may result;
- How severe the injuries are likely to be; and
- How many employees and others are likely to be exposed or affected.

By focusing on all the issues in this manner you should be able to determine priorities. If a risk means violence is likely to occur and injure many employees, controlling the risk should be given a high priority. On the other hand, if a risk has been identified and then assessed as unlikely to occur or will not expose employees to an injury, it should be given a lower priority and dealt with at a later time.

**Step 3 – Control the Risk** - Eliminate hazards or control the risk by making changes that protect people:

Having established where you may encounter hazards, you must now take preventative action to eliminate the hazards or reduce the risk. There are a number of ways of reducing and/or managing workplace hazards. In some cases, a combination of actions may be required to manage the hazard. On other occasions, it may be necessary to employ both short and long term measures to reduce the risk to an acceptable level effectively.

The preferred option is to eliminate the risk in total and every effort must be made to achieve this goal. This may not always be possible and in these cases you will work through other options until agreed and acceptable alternatives are found.

Avoid physical violence by recognising these signs and try to de-escalate the aggressive behaviour.

- Violence from external aggressors (clients, distressed people) may be immediate and unpreventable. Be prepared to take escape action as soon as possible.
- Where the aggressor threatens violence but has not yet become physically violent, do not do anything to aggravate them.
- If a duress alarm is in place and the situation is serious enough to warrant it, activate the alarm for duress response.
- Summon help and call police (if appropriate). If there are no other alternatives, self-defence may be the only option, but always aim to escape the incident first.
- Record details after the incident, notify or report the incident to your manager.
- Manager should ensure post incident support is provided as required including first aid, other impact management, reporting, debriefing and counselling. (*Refer to Psychological Harm & Trauma Procedure.*)

**Step 4 - Maintain and review** – Controls and procedures in working with clients where violence or aggression is a component.

### **Abusive, threatening or harassing telephone calls**

1. Try to calm the person by acknowledging the feeling of frustration and get them to explain their needs in a civil manner to enable you to provide help and guidance.

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2. If the behaviour continues, advise the caller that you cannot help them unless they are civil.
3. If this does not work, warn the caller that you will hang up unless they are civil.
4. If the behaviour continues, hang up. Immediately notify your manager of the incident and complete any reporting forms or write down the details.
5. For each call received, keep a personal log record of the time, details of the conversation and duration of the call, the gender of the caller, approximate age, and any other details such as accent, background noise etc. The Police will require this information to be reported.
6. Report the incident and any further calls to the Police Service for advice. Police have the power to trace the calls if warranted and take further action as required.

### **Verbal assault and threats**

Withdraw from the situation immediately. Do not put yourself at risk or make the situation worse.

1. Inform your manager immediately.
2. Complete WorkSafe NZ reporting requirements or write down the details.
3. Manager to ensure that the threatened worker is not left alone at work or placed in situations where he or she could be at risk of repeated aggression.
4. The incident should be reported to the Police (where appropriate).

### **Physical and armed assault**

1. If a duress alarm is in place, activate it.
2. Withdraw from the situation immediately if possible. Do not put yourself or others at risk or make the situation worse.
3. Take refuge in a safe place if required.
4. Summon help if possible and required.
5. If you cannot withdraw and you are facing imminent physical harm where there are no other options you are entitled to use reasonable force to protect yourself, but always aim to escape the situation first.
6. As soon as you can, withdraw to a safe place.
7. If you are injured, seek medical assistance immediately.
8. Contact the Police and notify your manager.
9. Complete WorkSafe NZ reporting requirements.

***In all situations YOUR safety is the priority.***

Successfully achieving the objectives of our job does not require any WorkSafe NZ employee to put themselves in harm's way. As the regulator, our workplaces are often a dynamic mix of various locations that present a multitude of hazards.

The following provides some guidance to manage the hazards and risks associated with our work.

**Field based visits:**

**Approach**

1. Park your car safely pointing in the direction you will be leaving and where you can exit quickly if necessary.
2. Look around before getting out of your vehicle.
3. Assess situation/premises before entering.
4. Make sure your car keys are accessible should a quick exit be required.
5. Take a cell/satellite phone with you, ensure that it is turned on and the battery is charged.
6. Ensure you have your WorkSafe NZ identification or warrant card with you.
7. If in doubt, drive away.

**Engagement**

1. Stay situationally aware.
2. Do not 'normalise' and accept abuse, swearing or aggression of any sort.
3. Be aware of any signs of increasing escalation.
4. Mentally check the indicators of violence or threatening behaviour.
5. It may be helpful to benchmark the behaviour. If you're neighbour, partner or checkout operator was acting like that would you consider it acceptable behaviour?
6. If at any stage you are in any doubt about your own safety, leave.

**Entering a building**

1. Listen before knocking at a door and stand to one side after knocking.
2. Don't go in if you feel unsafe.
3. If an intoxicated person(s) is present, assess the risk this presents.
4. Once inside the premises scan the room for any potential dangers. Be aware of others present in the room or building.
5. Avoid allowing people to stand between you and the exit door. Try to ensure you are always in a position where you can exit the premises quickly if necessary.

6. Avoid sitting in low chairs or other seating that may be difficult to get out of quickly.

### **Unannounced Visits**

1. Approach the person you wish to speak to, introduce yourself and clarify if they are the right person to talk to - principal/duty holder/boss, etc. of the site.
2. If it is not a good time, depending on the circumstances, arrange a time to return.
3. If the person you first approached is not the person you need to speak to ask them to direct you to the person who is.
4. If the site is, for example, a residential build, clarify that it is a workplace – are people employed there?

### **Develop an Exit Strategy**

1. You must have a well-developed exit strategy prepared before you decide to enter the site or commence the visit. This will help you stay calm and appear in control even when you are not feeling that way. If the situation becomes heated and de-escalation methods have not been successful then evoking your exit strategy will occur.
2. An exit strategy will cover:
  - a. Knowing the route you will take to leave the site whether you are walking or driving.
  - b. Presenting a calm exterior (even if that's not how you are feeling inside).
  - c. Being firm that you will not continue the meeting and ask them to leave or let them know you will leave.
  - d. Having a rehearsed script to facilitate close down of engagement.
  - e. Leaving immediately after you have said you will leave.

### **Office Interviews**

Your interviewee may be experiencing a range of personal issues as well as apprehension about the interview. Take some time to understand where they are coming from and if possible, arrange the meeting to minimise any potential triggers for them.

1. Check that you have a clear exit from the room.
2. Leave the door to the main office unlocked unless there is a need for it to be closed.
3. Keep window blinds open so that people can see into the meeting room.

4. Keep meeting rooms tidy with only the equipment needed for meetings, do not store others items in meeting rooms.
5. Workers should have swivel chairs with interviewees in fixed chairs to aid a quick exit.
6. Have panic buttons and ensure you understand the panic button procedures, they are tested and workers know what to do.
7. Test the door lock so you know how to use it in an emergency.
8. Make sure a co-worker knows about the meeting, who you are meeting with, why, and how long you expect to be.
9. To protect yourself from possible complaints following the interview, ask a co-worker to manage the entry and exit of the interviewee.

### **Post-Incident Management**

In all situations following an event where a WorkSafe NZ employee has been involved in an event whether actual or perceived, the following shall take place:

#### **Immediate actions**

1. Ensure your own safety.
2. Call the Police immediately if a threat or assault has taken place.
3. Call your manager to talk it through and get their advice and support.
4. Do not re-engage with the person until a re-engagement plan has been developed with your manager.

#### **Reporting**

1. Complete an Incident Report. All violence and threatening behaviour incidents are considered 'near misses' where no physical assault has taken place.
2. Follow Incident Reporting, Recording and Investigation Procedures.
3. Investigate the incident and determine if it could constitute 'obstruction of an inspector. If so activate that process.
4. Discuss follow up steps with your manager.
5. Record the incident in Guardian.
6. Highlight the incident during the health and safety component of your team meeting.

#### **Recovering**

- Experiencing a violent or threatening incident is not something to shrug off. It is normal to be frightened and for some of that fear to linger.
- People will vary in their reactions and depending on the severity of the incident.
- Look after the worker if you are their manager or a colleague. Be supportive.
- Traumatic events tend to have a cumulative effect.

- Refer to Psychological Harm and Trauma Policy and Guidelines for more information.

### **Mandatory Debriefing Process**

Where any WorkSafe NZ employee has been exposed to a traumatic event mandatory debriefing will occur in all situations. Debriefing is important because it:

- Supports the worker to make sense of the incident.
- Provides visibility to the incident.
- Enables us to review our controls for such incidents.
- Allows the team to study the dynamics of the incident and share perspectives to avoid a repeat or handle a similar situation in the future
- Contributes to ongoing improvement through reviewing our practices and developing new and safer ways of working.

Following a violent or threatening behaviour incident a full de-briefing must take place. This must happen regardless of the level of harm sustained or the preferences of the worker involved.

Debriefing involves the following steps:

1. The worker and manager discuss the incident, what happened and why. This is a normal part of the incident investigation process.
2. All workers who have experienced violent or threatening behaviour must be offered help through the Employment Assistance Programme or a trauma counsellor (*refer Psychological Harm and Trauma Procedures and guidelines*).
3. The worker should be reminded to take advantage of the service in the aftermath of an incident or when dealing with issues that may become overwhelming.
4. At the regular health and safety team meeting the team discuss the incident, the organisation/person involved and develop a safety management plan to:
  - Follow up with the particular organisation/person, for example return with two inspectors, interact over the phone, or through the post.
  - Avoid a repeat.
5. Continuous improvement practices should be employed so we can learn from the findings.

### **Training**

The manager shall ensure that all workers have completed the Tactical Communications module and identify any training shortfalls within their work group. Additional training is to be organised in conjunction with the Learning and Development Team for any workers

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requiring additional or refresher training. Refer to the Learning and Development guidelines.