

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: RAISING AWARENESS AND BRIDGING THE GAP WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT



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Emergency nurses in the United States are making great strides against workplace violence with the support and encouragement of the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA). Many nurses and professional nursing organizations are working tirelessly to raise awareness about the prevalence of violence against health care workers. ENA recently challenged members to raise awareness about workplace violence within their communities. Answering this challenge, many ENA chapters have chosen various methods to disseminate information and advocate for change to stop workplace violence.

The Golden Triangle ENA in Texas felt particularly charged to respond, as there have been many violent incidents against nurses in the rural area of Texas they serve. Multiple chapter members had personally been impacted by workplace violence, and many of these nurses reported they felt that they were discouraged from formally reporting the incident or felt it was a pointless endeavor because “nothing comes of it.” This belief is not uncommon. One study reported that only 19% of violent incidents against health care workers were reported.¹ After dealing with ongoing frustration regarding the normalization of workplace violence, members chose to reach out to local elected leaders and law enforcement to develop a better working relationship.

The purpose of this editorial is to share with readers the process that the chapter followed to get community support to raise awareness of workplace violence and to bridge the gap

with law enforcement. A secondary goal is to share ideas that may be beneficial to other emergency nurses and ENA chapters that are working to facilitate a collaborative relationship with community leaders and local law enforcement.

Elected chapter officers began by contacting local city council members to schedule a time to present statistics and information on workplace violence (see [Figure](#)). They were able to attend 4 city council meetings to present them with facts: violence against emergency nurses has reached epidemic levels, and violence against health care workers has been normalized, with many nurses feeling as if this is a “part of their job.” The local city council members were shocked and saddened to learn how prevalent this issue has become. City council members were encouraged to support initiatives, encourage legislation that provides support to health care workers, and raise awareness that workplace violence will not be tolerated. Following the discussion, the elected mayors of 3 separate local cities issued a proclamation for Violence in the Workplace Awareness Day.

After the initial discussion with elected community officials, members began reaching out to all local law enforcement agencies to explain the prevalence of workplace violence and to raise awareness of the perceived lack of support for nurses who are victims of violent crimes in the workplace. Local law enforcement agencies were excited to begin a dialogue on how nurses in the community could feel more supported by law enforcement. These discussions resulted in the Texas ENA’s Violence in the Workplace Declaration being signed by various local law enforcement agencies. This edict declares the support of local law enforcement agencies for health care workers. Also, the district attorney, chief of police, and all of the criminal investigation detectives for the largest local city reached out to each of the major hospitals to meet with the nurses. During this meeting, law enforcement personnel discussed violence prevention and provided nurses with important guidelines to follow if an incident of workplace violence does occur (see [Table](#)). How these events will shape the local health care environment and the relationship between health care workers and law enforcement personnel is yet to be seen, but it has facilitated a dialogue between the 2 groups.

Law enforcement personnel have expressed that they want emergency nurses to feel supported and safe. However, they also have a desire for members to understand why

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TABLE

Guidelines from law enforcement when filing a report:

- Get a license plate or other identifying information if possible of the aggressor
- When law enforcement arrives, include a detailed recount of the incident where the reader of the report can visualize what happened, details can't be stressed enough
- Include the names of any witnesses of the workplace violence incident in the police report
- When completing the police report, list all equipment that may have been destroyed in the act, this may lead to additional charges and demonstrates the level of violence
- Include pictures, if applicable, of any injuries or damage that occurred because of the incident
- If your state has enhanced charges for health care workers that increase the punishment against offenders, you should remind the officer taking the report to ensure they file the appropriate charges
- If security footage is available, notify law enforcement personnel immediately so they can work with the health care organization to obtain footage to use as evidence
- Document the injury with photos for multiple days after the event because the injury can change or be more visible
- If your state has enhanced charges for health care workers that increase the punishment against offenders, you should remind the officer taking the report to ensure they file the appropriate charges

certain charges are pursued and others are dropped based on current legislation and the severity of varying charges. As a result, the chapter is determining if there is enough community support to host an educational conference for health care workers to learn from experts (eg, district attorney, chief of police, county judge) about the legal process that occurs after a report is made. This will allow nurses to better understand why some charges may not be pursued, whereas others are. If there is not enough support for the conference, the speakers will attend a local ENA chapter meeting to provide education and discuss workplace violence concerns with chapter members.

As emergency nurses continue to advocate for change in their communities, it is important not to remain



FIGURE

Left, Keri Reeves, GTENA President, and right, Misty Dantin, GTENA President-Elect, attending a violence awareness event at which law enforcement personnel met with health care providers.

complacent. Unfortunately, as violent incidents against nurses have become normalized, many emergency nurses feel resigned to accept this fate. However, emergency nurses have a large voice and deserve the right to feel safe in the workplace. Hopefully, this overview provides a good starting point or ideas for nurses working to stop workplace violence in their respective communities.

Author Disclosures

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