

Workplace Violence: It's Real--But We're Responding

'Stand-downs,' And Use Of Satellites

by Ron Hall, Office of Communications

In his pamphlet titled "The Crisis," Revolutionary War-era writer **Thomas Paine** observed that "These Are The Times That Try Men's Souls." If he were rephrasing that thought in 1999, he might observe that "These Are The Times In Which Folks Are Willing To Waste Each Other Over A Perceived Nasty Stare, Or In Order To Steal \$9 From A Colleague's Wallet."

All of this helps to explain why the issue of "violence in the workplace" has received increased attention of late--and USDA is no exception.

Workplace violence can be any act of physical violence, threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening, disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It can involve employees, visitors, contractors, or other non- federal employees.

Here are some recent initiatives which the Department has initiated to address the issue of "violence in the workplace."

First, last year Secretary **Dan Glickman** created a USDA Workplace Violence Steering Committee to advise him on this issue. Based on its recommendation, he then updated a Secretary's Memorandum from 1996, titled "Workplace Violence Policy," with a more detailed version.

Specifically, Secretary's Memorandum 4200-1, dated February 10, 1999 and titled "Workplace Violence Prevention," advises that "Threats or acts of violence against persons or property will not be tolerated. This includes acts of intimidation or harassment, or other inappropriate behavior which causes fear for personal safety. These can be cause for serious disciplinary action and possible criminal charges."

The memo then spells out responsibilities of various officials at USDA to prevent and to respond to workplace violence through various activities. These include "the availability of an effective employee assistance program," a process to "identify, report, monitor, and respond to specific areas with a high potential for workplace violence," and "the need to report all threats or acts of violence to supervisors or managers."

Second, the Department distributed to employees a publication titled "The USDA Handbook on Workplace Violence Prevention and Response," which is dated December 1998. According to **Jim Stevens**, director of the Safety & Health Management Division in the Office of Human Resources Management, the 14-page handbook advises that "It is up to each employee to help make USDA a safe workplace for all of us."

“All components of our USDA community,” Stevens observed, “have a role to play--including employees, managers and supervisors, agency heads, human resources staff, employee assistance program counselors, unions and employee organizations, security and facilities staff, law enforcement staff, and conflict resolution offices.”

“The handbook elaborates on how each of those components can be helpful in preventing violence in the workplace.”

Third, individual agencies have launched their own initiatives to guard against workplace violence. For instance, according to **Kathy Bowman**, a writer-editor with the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Region, based in Portland, Ore., last summer all units within that region held a two-hour “stand-down for personal safety.”

“During that period,” she explained, “all production in our offices temporarily ceased in order that employees, through discussions and/or special events, could focus on reducing the hazard of workplace violence that they face on a daily basis, raise employee awareness about the potential for violence, and provide some key tips on ensuring self-protection.”

Food Safety and Inspection Service program analyst **John Campbell** said that in February his agency distributed a four-page pamphlet, titled “Preventing Workplace Violence--A Guide for FSIS Employees.” “We tailored this publication,” he noted, “to address workplace situations that might be unique to a number of our employees, such as our meat and poultry inspectors.”

On April 6 the Natural Resources Conservation Service hosted a live, interactive broadcast on “Workplace Violence Prevention.” “This satellite broadcast constituted our first--but probably not our last--training session for all our employees on preventing violence in the workplace,” advised NRCS personnel management specialist **Solomon Midgett**.

“Workplace violence is real,” acknowledged Stevens. “But with awareness and preparation, we can minimize its effect on our work environment.”