

Terri Aversa's remarks

Thanks Smokey and Deb for your important remarks. I'm Terri Aversa, one of OPSEU's Health and Safety Officers.

Nowhere in Ontario's health and safety legislation does it mention workplace violence or specify steps that employers must take to take to prevent violence in the workplace.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act was enacted in 1979, back when the focus on health and safety was mostly industrial.

Under that legislation, workplace parties must rely on the "general duty clause" for protection, where employers must take reasonable precautions to protect workers from hazards.

But both Smokey and Deb pointed out that violence is often considered to be part of the job. If it is considered part of the job then it is often difficult for workplace violence to even be recognized as a hazard in the first place.

Even if workers know it's a hazard because they face the mental and physical effects of the violence, it is difficult to seek improvements in the workplace when the law is so general.

Health and Safety legislation needs to be modernized to protect workers against workplace violence.

Ontario needs a new Regulation under the Occupational Health and Safety Act that recognizes workplace violence as a hazard and compels employers to take steps to prevent it. The Regulation should cover all workers and should define workplace violence as being both verbal and physical.

The regulation should include specific measures that employers must take to protect workers against this hazard, such as,

- Conduct risk assessments in the workplace
- Establish workplace violence policies and prevention programs
- Establish work practices and procedures to eliminate or minimize risk,
- Establish procedures for reporting, investigating and recording violent incidents
- Provide information and training to workers

Smokey discussed the poll. Looking at our findings, it is clear that improvements to current legislation are needed to address this dire situation faced by social service workers, as well as all workers.

Other provinces have done it—workers in Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island are all better protected than Ontario's workers.

And within the last month, the Canada Labour Code was changed to protect federal workers from verbal and physical violence.

It's time for Ontario to follow suit and specifically address workplace violence prevention in its health and safety laws. Doing so will assist workers in social services to continue the important and caring work they do and help them to go home from work in the same shape they arrived at work in.

Thank you. Do you have any questions for us?

Both Smokey and Deb said that violence is often considered as “part of the job.”