



PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE FOR TWARMF MEMBERS

Workplace violence can arise from many sources, including frustrated customers, heated landowner interactions, disputes during field operations, or internal tension among employees. For TWARMF members, risks are present in offices, at public counters and meetings, and out in the field. While no organization can eliminate the threat entirely, the right combination of awareness, facility design, effective staff–public separation, tabletop practice, and clearly defined roles can significantly reduce exposures and improve outcomes when incidents occur.

Recognizing Early Warning Signs in Office and Field Environments

Prevention windows are often brief. Warning signs—such as escalating frustration, verbal threats, belligerent behavior at a counter, unusual or erratic actions at a public meeting, or significant personal stressors—frequently precede incidents but may go unrecognized without clear reporting channels. Supervisors should encourage staff to trust their instincts, document concerning behaviors, and escalate promptly to management or law enforcement when warranted. Normalize reporting by making it simple (e.g., a short form and direct email route), timely (same day submission), and visible (leadership follows up and shares high level lessons). In field settings, crews should review property history, understand who is expected to be present, and have a polite exit script ready if tension rises. These practices reinforce a culture where early action is expected—and supported.

Facility Design for Safer Public Interactions

Facility design is one of the most effective controls because it reshapes interactions before they escalate. TWARMF members often manage public counters that handle payments, service questions, permits, and records requests—points where frustration can surface. The following measures create predictable separation between staff and the public while maintaining service quality:

- Service counters with protective barriers or glazing to deter reaching, grabbing, or throwing objects.
- Controlled access beyond reception (badged or buzz in entry) to prevent unescorted movement into operational areas.
- Natural escape routes and clear sightlines so employees can step away quickly and supervisors can observe developing issues.
- Secure interior workspaces and meeting rooms with solid doors, reliable locks, and the ability to summon help.
- Camera coverage in high risk or high traffic areas that supports real time awareness and post incident review.

Pair these features with active monitoring – reception rotation during busy periods, manager presence during contentious appointments, and coordinated law enforcement standby for high interest agenda items. Together, these strategies promote calmer interactions and faster recognition of risk.

Public Meetings and Field Operations

Water and river authorities routinely engage the public on emotionally charged topics, including easement access, vegetation management, drainage work, flood projects, groundwater rules, and utility relocations. Risk management starts before the meeting or site visit:

- Plan ahead for items likely to draw strong reactions; coordinate with law enforcement when warranted.
- Position staff near exits and ensure quick egress options, especially in boardrooms or rented venues.
- Discuss inherent risks as a team before potentially contentious site visits; align on stop work or disengagement thresholds.
- Park for rapid egress in remote locations and maintain a clear path to vehicles.
- Disengage early if tone shifts or conditions feel unsafe; step back, document, and remove staff from the area with appropriate controls in place.

Tabletop Exercises

Well-designed practice builds confidence, clarifies roles, and exposes gaps—without disrupting service or causing undue stress. Tabletop exercises are guided, discussion-based sessions that walk a cross functional group through realistic scenarios—such as a heated board meeting, a lobby confrontation, or a contentious easement inspection. Tabletop exercises are cost effective, easy to schedule, and ideal for districts with small teams or dispersed field crews. A strong exercise typically includes:

- Clear objectives: Which policies, roles, and decisions are we testing?
- A simple scenario with “injects”: Gradually add details (e.g., law enforcement ETA delays, unexpected visitors arrive) to test adaptability.
- Role clarity and communications mapping: Who calls whom, in what order, using which channels?
- Decision points: When do we disengage, secure reception, relocate a meeting, or request law enforcement standby?
- Facility and field considerations: Are secure rooms, exit paths, panic buttons, and safe staging areas identified?
- After action capture: Document strengths, gaps, and a corrective action plan with owners and timelines.

Because tabletop exercises are low impact, you can run them more frequently – rotating scenarios across customer service, engineering, field operations, and administration. Over time, this cadence builds shared muscle memory and surfaces policy or layout adjustments before an incident forces change.

Clearly Defined Roles in the Emergency Action Plan

An Emergency Action Plan only works if people know their part. Clarify roles in writing and validate them during tabletop discussions:

- Incident Lead (on scene): Assesses conditions, initiates protective actions, and coordinates with management until relieved.
- Communications Coordinator: Manages internal updates (radio, text, or Teams), external calls to 911/non-emergency lines, and post incident notifications.
- Facilities/Security Liaison: Secures access points, supports staff–public separation, and guides law enforcement to the scene.
- Operations/Field Supervisor: Accounts for field crews, halts or reroutes work if needed, and confirms everyone’s status.
- Employee Support/HR: Tracks impacted personnel, arranges relief coverage, and coordinates after incident support and documentation.

Each role should have a simple checklist (trigger, first actions, key contacts, and handoff). Keep copies in quickly accessible locations – reception, boardroom podium, field trucks, and control rooms – and verify at least annually that names, numbers, and procedures are current.

Building a Culture of Safety for TWARMF Members

Whether risk emerges at a public counter, in a boardroom, among staff, or during field operations, prevention relies on continuous awareness, purposeful facility design, predictable separation between the public and employees, and practice that clarifies roles. By reinforcing early intervention, improving facility design and access control, adopting tabletop exercises as a sustainable training model, and hard wiring role clarity into the Emergency Action Plan, TWARMF members can reduce exposure, respond more confidently, and strengthen resilience across all operations.

If your district or authority would like assistance evaluating current practices or improving emergency response processes, TWARMF Risk Control staff are available for consultation and support. Members can also contact Jeremy Wade at jeremy.wade@sedgwick.com for additional guidance.