

Working Alone:

it takes two ... workers

Life is cheap — or at least it is for some. For Darnell Pratt the life of Grant De Patie cost \$12.30, the price of a tank of gas and a joy ride. De Patie, a 24 year-old service station attendant from Maple Ridge, B.C., was working alone the night he was killed in 2005. De Patie tried to stop the 16 year-old drunken Pratt from leaving without paying for gas. Pratt struck De Patie with a stolen car and dragged him under the vehicle for seven kilometres. Pratt was sentenced to nine years in prison for manslaughter.

More recent incidents in the Toronto area took the lives of Jayesh Prajapati, 44, and Atifeh Rada, 62. In separate incidents, both were run over and killed by customers who gassed up and left without paying. Many suspect the workers pursued the customers fearing their wages would be docked to pay for the stolen gas. Although docking wages to cover customer theft is illegal in Ontario the practice persists.

Tragedies like these are sadly too common. "Lone" workers employed in retail stores and gas stations are often the target of shoplifting, "gas and dashes", robberies, and violence — especially late at night. However, it doesn't have to be this way. There is much that can be done to protect workers in this sector.

As a result of Grant De Patie's tragedy, the B.C. government introduced legislation, known as "Grant's Law". One of its key provisions was to legally require employers to have customers prepay for fuel. Health and safety advocates are fighting for a similar law in Ontario.

However, more than retail workers and service station attendants are at risk. Anyone who works alone or in isolation is vulnerable to violence and other workplace hazards.

What is "working alone"?

Working alone or in isolation means to work where assistance would not be readily available to workers in case of emergency, injury or illness. These "lone" workers have little or no contact with their co-workers or supervisors over the course of their shift.

For example, the receptionist in a small real estate office may be considered a "lone" worker. Alternatively, a construction worker who is working in a location that cannot be seen by co-workers may also be considered a lone worker. Others include taxi drivers, home care workers, security guards, cleaners, maintenance workers, or ticket agents working alone in a kiosk.

Who is most at risk?

Workers who handle cash and other valuables

The greatest risk to workers who handle cash is the potential for violence (physical assault, verbal abuse). The main motivating factor is robbery. The occupations at greatest risk for robbery and workplace assault are:

- Workers in liquor stores;
- Gas station attendants;
- Convenience store clerks;
- Workers in food outlets and bars;
- Bus drivers and taxi drivers;
- Ticket agents (working in a kiosk).

Workers who work with the public

Workers who work with members of the public are also at risk of violence and harassment. These include social workers, community health care workers, receptionists, sales representatives, postal workers, bus drivers, real estate agents and nurses.

Workers who work in isolation

Those who work in isolation away from routine contact with other people are at risk for violent attacks from intruders. These include custodians, trades workers, security guards and parking lot attendants.

Workers who perform hazardous work

Workers who perform hazardous work alone, without routine interaction with other employees and the public may be unable to get immediate help if they become ill or are injured. These include construction workers, hydro workers, forestry workers, factory workers, steelworkers, chemical workers and auto mechanics.

To determine whether assistance is readily available, consider the following conditions:

- *Presence of others:* Are there other people in the vicinity?
- *Awareness:* Would the people present be aware of the need for assistance? Can they see or hear this need?
- *Willingness:* Are the people present willing and able to assist if need be?
- *Timeliness:* Are the people present able to assist in a timely manner?

What are the health effects?

While working alone is often considered a safety hazard, it can also impact health. Beyond the injuries that might result from a physical assault, workers health can be greatly affected.

Working alone can be highly demanding when you are the only staff performing a task. For example, a lone individual working in a fast food outlet with a line-up of customers can be stressful and demanding. It can also be scary to work alone late at night. A lack of contact and social support from co-workers can create a sense of helplessness, anxiety, frustration and isolation when problems arise on the job. This anxiety and helplessness can lead to stress.

Research has shown that workers with little control over their work and little or no social support from co-workers, supervisors or management are at greatest risk of developing stress.

Stress is our body's way of adapting or responding to our environment or to a part of it. An individual experiencing stress may have sweaty palms, a flushed face, upset stomach, an increased heart rate, and feelings of anger, impatience, irritability or frustration. Ongoing stress can lead to colds, flu, viruses, and cold sores as well as psychological problems such as loneliness and depression. Chronic stress can also trigger pre-existing diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, skin diseases and asthma. In severe cases it can lead to cancer.

What is the law?

While an employer can require you to work alone he/she still has a legal duty to take reasonable precautions to provide a safe and healthy workplace. This can be found in health and safety laws — federal, provincial and territorial. However, many jurisdictions have gone beyond general employer duties to provide specific regulations for working alone including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. In general, the employer must:



Information Bulletins for health, safety and environmental representatives

RESOURCE LINES

- Provide effective communication (radio, phone or cell phone) between a "lone" worker and persons capable of assisting the worker in case of an emergency, injury or illness.
- Ensure that either a competent worker or supervisor visits the worker, or the worker contacts the employer or another competent worker within a specified interval of time (the more hazardous the work, the shorter the intervals between communication).
- Identify and assess the risks arising from an employee working alone (this should be done in consultation with the joint health and safety committee (JHSC) or worker health and safety representative).
- Put controls in place to eliminate or reduce the risks of working alone.
- Develop safe work procedures and train workers on these procedures.

B.C.'s regulation specifically requires safety procedures and training for workers in late night retail settings, including written procedures to ensure worker safety when handling money. The law was the first to require employers to schedule two or more workers for any late night shift or ensure that a lone worker is physically separated from the public by a locked door or barrier during the late hours in any retail outlet, such as a gas station, convenience store or all-night fast food restaurant.

Unfortunately, B.C. amended their regulation in 2012. It now allows employers a less protective third option, to establish a violence prevention program, as a means of protecting their night staff. This includes the use of time lock safes, safety procedures and personal emergency transmitters and monitoring. Employers who choose to set up a violence prevention program are required to provide an independent audit report of their program.

Ontario lacks a specific law to address "working alone" health and safety issues. However, Ontario's *Occupational Health & Safety Act* does require employers to develop and implement a workplace policy and program to address violence and harassment, one of the key hazards associated with working alone. Some Ontario regulations (i.e. Regulation for Industrial Establishments, Regulation for Health Care and Residential Facilities) also specify a minimum number of workers required in some situations such as confined space entry or working on live electrical conductors. Ontario's health care regulation requires workers/ attendants stationed outside and near the entrance of a confined space to be in constant communication with the worker inside the confined space and must be provided with an appropriate device (e.g. walkie-talkie or pager) to summon an adequate rescue response.

What can employers do to protect workers?

Working alone should be minimized and effective worker protection must exist for the instances where working alone is necessary. Employers should also work with the joint health and safety committee or worker health and safety representative to implement a prevention plan.

Here are some helpful steps to ensure the safety of workers.

- Assess and control or eliminate all other hazards of the workplace.
- Ensure all workers are properly trained to do their job and have health and safety training on all the other workplace hazards.
- Provide protective shielding or barriers to prevent violent attacks. Where this can't be done, plan a safe escape route or safe area the worker can retreat to and call for help.
- Make sure there is good visibility around the counter/desk by keeping displays low and surfaces clutter free to help deter thefts and/or attacks.
- Make sure workstations face the door so workers can see anyone entering the room.
- Establish a check-in procedure, making sure regular contact occurs verbally and/or visually with the lone worker. Provide workers with proper communication devices such as cell phones and beepers.
- Install and use a locked drop safe.
- Install panic buttons and/or provide other effective communication devices for emergencies.
- Use a security system such as video surveillance cameras, mirrors, height markers and observation windows.
- Schedule higher risk tasks during normal business hours, or when other workers who can assist in an emergency are present.
- Make sure the workplace is well lit, both inside and out so the worker is visible.
- Develop an emergency action plan and train all workplace parties in the plan.
- Investigate incidents in the workplace and regularly evaluate the emergency action plan.
- Update and revise company policy and emergency procedures as changes arise.

What can workers do?

It is the employer's legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace. If individuals work alone and the employer doesn't have a plan in place to protect them, some things can be done in the meantime while waiting for more substantial controls to be implemented by the employer.

- Be alert and aware of the surroundings. Look for anyone who appears to be loitering in or around the workplace. If they don't leave, call the police.

- Stay in regular contact with co-workers and supervisors during your shift.
- As a backup, always let a friend, family member or security guard know you are working late and when you expect to leave.
- Don't try to be a hero. Retreat from a threatening person or situation. Again, call the police if necessary.
- Report to the employer all situations, incidents or "near misses".
- Follow work and emergency procedures provided by the employer.
- Talk to your co-workers regularly. It is important to have social contact and be able to discuss/vent workplace concerns.
- For unionized workers, negotiate contract language to address working alone.
- Talk to politicians about supporting working alone legislation and stronger enforcement of existing legislation.

NOTE: For more information on the hazards associated with working alone contact a WHSC training services representative near you or visit our website at www.whsc.on.ca. Also be sure to secure a copy of the WHSC *Resource Line* entitled, *Workplace Violence: predictable and preventable*.



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