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Lessons from Aurora, Co. for property owners & managers

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With the tragic shootings in Aurora, Colorado another myth of "that can't happen here" was shattered. The unthinkable has happened on college campuses, in offices, at malls, outside grocery stores and now at a movie theatre. Performance venues including theaters, concert halls and auditoriums, and other centers where large groups of people are gathered in a confined space, are being targeted for attacks. And overall, homicides in the workplace are on the rise. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2010, the latest year for which figures are available, of the 4,547 fatal workplace injuries, 506 were homicides.

No one wants to think about a mass shooting happening in their building or place of work. Understandably, many may feel there is nothing that can be done to prepare for, let alone prevent, something from happening. In fact, there are measures that can be taken to protect a facility against threats and mitigate an actual attack. So rather than hoping an Aurora never happens, let that tragedy be a clarion call to take action to plan and prepare. In that spirit, here are five steps for property owners and managers to get started:

Update your Emergency Response and Crisis Communications Plan. Plans that sit on the shelf, gathering dust aren't of much use when a crisis hits. Plans need to evolve with the organization they are designed to help and the world in which we now live and work.

Educate your staff. They are one of the best resources your organization has to identify potential violence before it happens. Employees can be trained to look for troubling behavior in co-workers and suspicious activities of unknown individuals, i.e. someone standing in the same area or videotaping day after day. Security procedures can be expanded to include a check of all exit doors to ensure they have not been propped open and no one is loitering outside the doors before a show begins.

Collaborate with law enforcement. At the local and federal level, law enforcement agencies are tremendous resources for training programs and expert counsel. They want to work closely with the private sector in emergency planning as it vastly improves emergency response. We regularly invite local police, fire and emergency response personnel to participate in table top exercises for that reason. The Department of Homeland Security offers a range of training and resources for the commercial facility sector (www.dhs.gov/cfsector).

Demonstrate your Emergency Response Plans. You don't want an actual crisis to be the first time you put your plan to the test. Table top exercises and drills show you which parts of your plans work well and which ones need to be retooled. They also give your Crisis Response Team a chance to work together before a situation occurs.

Communicate. Effectively managing a crisis is not just about the tactical response. Communications plays a significant role in getting the right information to the right people quickly. When we do table top exercises, we invite everyone who works on property to participate including security guards,

parking attendants and janitors. Any one of those people could be the first to see something suspicious, so key staff and vendors on property should be empowered to say something if they see something. Similarly, communicate with abutting properties about your crisis plans as a collaborative approach to surveillance and communication can stop violence before it happens.

There are lessons for all of us in what happened in Auroraâ€”lessons you can act on to protect your property, your reputation, and your most important asset: your people.

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