

# Keeping workers safe



In October 2023, Dr. Helen Ouyang penned an op-ed for The New York Times titled “Stabbed. Kicked. Spit On. Violence in American Hospitals is Out of Control.”

*What has stayed with me most, Dr. Ouyang wrote, is not the near miss of a thrown computer or a slur a patient used but a medical student saying to me after he witnessed a violent episode, “I learned today that I don’t want to go into emergency medicine.” The field is seeing a steep decline in applicants. Who will tend to waiting patients?*

There’s perhaps no more sobering question. The same article cited startling statistics: A 2022 American College of Emergency Physicians survey of emergency department (ED) doctors found that 55% said they had been physically assaulted, with a third of those resulting in injuries. The risks were even higher for ED nurses, with over 70% reporting they had sustained physical assaults at work — and only 15% of surveyed hospital nurses said they would continue in the same job in one year.



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It’s cliché to say there are no easy answers, but there are people committed to pinpointing possible solutions. That includes Kat Kemper-Kelly, a Vizient senior consultant in security management, who has spent the bulk of her career as a leader in hospital risk, safety, security and emergency preparedness.

*“If employees aren’t safe,” she said, “they can’t provide care to patients, which is every hospital’s No. 1 business.”*



**Kat Kemper-Kelly**  
Senior Consultant, Security

*“ Security is important to employee retention because it’s a baseline of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs – people need to feel safe in what they do and where they are. ”*

Kat Kemper-Kelly is a senior consultant with the Vizient security management and operations solution. Kat has over 25 years healthcare experience and is dedicated to enhancing the safety and security programs of healthcare facilities, with a focus on minimizing risks and mitigating harm to patients, visitors and employees while optimizing operational efficiency and reducing costs.

### What are some steps hospitals can take to boost safety?

- **Security risk assessment.** Step No. 1 is to focus on three main areas: people, systems and buildings. By understanding all risks — including workplace violence, technology vulnerabilities and natural disasters — health systems can better mitigate them. For instance, **active shooter** is top of mind for risk and many hospitals have installed metal detectors to prevent entrants from bringing weapons into the building. It’s also advisable to limit access points — some facilities have up to 100 entrances, so it’s important to ensure those aren’t open to everyone to minimize the risk of weapons entering the facility.
- **Culture.** Embrace open communication, including encouraging employees to report any red flags they see. Additionally, it’s important that the person who leads your security team directly reports to the C-suite, whether to the chief operating officer or chief nursing officer. Essentially, your security team should no longer roll up under facilities but should instead be positioned in a more operations-focused role as their scope has expanded from securing facilities to securing employees, patients, assets, information, medication and utilities. And senior executives who want to learn more about developing a safer hospital environment can access educational resources through organizations like the **International Association for Healthcare Safety and Security**.
- **Threat management team.** If you haven’t already established one in your hospital, make it a top priority. The team should include representatives from security, human resources, risk management, the emergency department and social services, along with anyone else the leadership team thinks appropriate. The group should meet at least once a month and any time a risk is found.
- **Proactive, not reactive.** Understand the **Joint Commission standards** for identifying red flags (such as general agitation like clenched fists and a raised voice), as well preventative tips offered by **OSHA**. De-escalation is often the key to avoiding violence, as well as consistent communication. If a patient shows signs of aggression, especially around issues such as long wait times, quickly let them know what is happening and why. Employees who are dealing with personal issues such as domestic violence should let their supervisor know as soon as possible so they can alert the security team. Another proactive measure is to implement regular and continuous safety training for staff.
- **Technology.** AI-enabled cameras make it easier to locate suspicious individuals within your hospital and listening technologies screen for escalating voices. But central to increased safety is integrating all your security technologies together — from access control to metal detectors to cameras to mass communication, the combined power of these devices is immense. The use of technology should supplement security personnel, which ensures security staffing can be maintained at lower levels and is focused on needed response. For instance, one southwest-based hospital created a workplace violence code that immediately alerts senior leaders that an event has occurred and initiates a checklist for accountability and follow up.

To learn more about how we can help you enhance your safety and security operations, contact us at [securitysolutions@vizientinc.com](mailto:securitysolutions@vizientinc.com)

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