

## TIP SHEET

### Working Alone in the Community

#### Background

Home care is health-care services that are provided in a client's residence. Depending on the client's needs, it can be provided on a 24/7 basis and involve multiple different organizations or care providers, including regulated and unregulated care providers, who deliver different types or aspects of care to the same client. Often, community health-care workers are doing this work in the client's residence alone.

The Public Services Health and Safety Association (PSHSA) defines working alone as *"The performance of any work function by a worker in circumstances where the workers cannot be seen or heard by another worker capable of providing assistance in a timely manner in the event of injury, ill health or emergency."*

#### Risks

There are a number of health and safety risks health-care workers can experience when working alone in the community.

- Health-care workers travel alone and in all kinds of weather to get to their client's residence.
- They may have to travel to or through high-risk communities where there are high levels of crime.
- They work alone in a client's home or residence and may encounter people other than the client for whom they have no information.
- There may be pets that have not been identified or contained prior to their arrival.

#### Legislation

In Ontario, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHS Act, or the Act)* does not provide specific requirements for working alone. However, the general duties for employers and supervisors under Sections 25 and 27 of the *OHS Act* address the duties of employers with some key duties related to working alone, including:

- Provide information, instruction and supervision to workers (*OHS Act* sec 25(2)(a)).
- Ensure equipment, materials and protective devices are provided and maintained in good condition (*OHS Act* sec 25(1)(a)(b)).
- Ensure that measures and procedures are carried out in the workplace (*OHS Act* sec 25(1)(c)).
- Ensure policies and programs for workplace violence and harassment are in place, reviewed annually, and that workers are trained on these policies and programs (*OHS Act* sec 32.0.1(a), 32.0.5(2)).
- Assess and reassess the risks of workplace violence to ensure controls in place are effective (*OHS Act* sec 32.0.3).
- Protect workers by establishing controls to address identified risks and ensure workers have a means for summoning immediate assistance (*OHS Act* sec 32.0.2(2)(b)).

## **Worker Duties**

Workers must generally work in compliance with the Act, only perform work they have been trained to do, report hazards, and use or wear required protective equipment, devices or clothing (OHSA sec 28).

When community healthcare workers feel the work could put them at risk of physical injury, they have an unrestricted right to refuse unsafe work (OHSA sec 43). Where a worker believes the work is dangerous and puts them at risk of physical injury, they must immediately report the circumstances of the work refusal to their supervisor and remain in the workplace during the investigation so they can participate in the work refusal investigation.

## **Collective Agreement**

ONA has also negotiated articles into collective agreements to specifically protect community homecare workers.

The following articles in the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) provincial agreement can help ensure lone workers are protected:

- 1) Article 8.14
  - Employers are to develop workplace violence policies and review them with the JHSC.
  - Share the policies and ensure all employees receive training and retraining on the policies.
  - The employer will act immediately for all actual or potential risks to personal safety with the potential to change practice or withdraw services.
  - The employer will notify the JHSC and union in writing of all incidents related to violence within four (4) days as per OHSA.
- 2) Article 21.07
  - The employer is to discuss any changes in the employer's policies or practices with the union.
- 3) Article 18.02
  - Orientation and in-services on program or procedural changes are provided to all Nurses.

## **JHSC Tips**

Members of the JHSC can ensure that community healthcare workers who are working alone are protected from injury or illness by:

- 1) Recommending that the employer develop policies and procedures which address the hazards of working alone. These can include buddy systems and check-in procedures but also involve adjusting work schedules, moving care from the home into a clinic or other public healthcare space, and denial of services.
- 2) Reviewing workplace violence risk assessments to ensure all risks have control measures assigned. Ensuring violence risk reassessments are done following an incident to ensure the measures and procedures continue to protect the worker and gaps can be addressed.
- 3) Ensuring that the employer has a system to assess and identify persons with a history of violence that is available to all workers.
- 4) Ensuring workers have a reliable means to summon immediate assistance. With the significant advances with work-alone technology, all workers who work alone should have access to a personal safety response system (PSRS) that allows them to summon immediate assistance.

- 5) Ensuring workers are trained. The training should include the workplace violence policy including measures for summoning immediate assistance, methods to identify, prevent and manage (de-escalate) aggressive behaviours, and document the aggressive or violent behaviours of clients. They should also be trained on how to report actual or near-miss incidents. Training should be done upon hire and at regular intervals or whenever there has been a change in practice.

Contact your Bargaining Unit President or Labour Relations Officer with any questions.

### **Resources**

Public Services Health and Safety Association

1. Workplace Violence Prevention Toolkit for Home Care  
<https://workplace-violence.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/pshsa-varb-workplace-violence-prevention-toolkit-for-home-care-06f-wvymnaen0819.pdf>
2. Protecting Workers who Work Alone  
<https://www.pshsa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PSHSA-Protecting-Workers-Who-Work-Alone-VWAFCAEN0306.pdf>