



Workplace law reforms overdue

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New Brunswick's economy is built on small business. And our reputation is built on caring for each other, including our employees and co-workers.

On April 1, new legislation on workplace violence and harassment becomes law. These new provisions expand on a worker's right to a healthy and safe workplace by recognizing that just as working from heights or performing repetitive tasks are workplace hazards, so too are violence and harassment.

Over the past few years, WorkSafeNB heard from industry stakeholders who raised concerns about violence in their work environments and its impact. They told us about the high personal cost from emotional trauma and physical injury; and they told us about the other costs such as increased absenteeism, lost productivity and higher insurance premiums. These costs are borne by the province as a whole.

New Brunswick was one of the few provinces without violence or harassment provisions in its occupational health and safety legislation. After consulting stakeholders, WorkSafeNB worked with government to mould the legislation. Originally scheduled to come into effect Sept. 1, 2018, it was pushed back to allow employers more time to prepare.

So why was the legislation necessary? Violence and harassment are faced by many New Brunswick workers. Employees who deal with cash, work alone or have direct contact with customers are at elevated risk of being hurt, threatened or harassed. Regrettably, we have far too many incidents occurring in our province.

Examples include a taxi driver robbed at knifepoint; a coffee shop worker assaulted by a customer who received the wrong order; a bar server sexually harassed by a co-worker or customer; and a home-care worker being spat on by a client.

We recently learned of a Moncton nurse who was assaulted by a patient's husband. The assault lasted for 11 minutes, and she was left with a concussion, broken nose and two black eyes.

No employee should have to face this type of behaviour while on the job. We know that employers want to make their workplace as healthy and safe as possible for workers. Understanding and complying with the new legislation will show workers that employers care about them. In turn, they will be more productive and engaged.

So what does the legislation on violence and harassment mean to business owners?

All employers must develop and implement a code of practice for preventing workplace harassment. They must also perform a risk assessment of their workplace to determine the likelihood of violence.

Once the risk assessment is complete, depending on certain factors, they may have to develop a code of practice for preventing violence. One factor is the size of the business - any employer who regularly employs 20 or more workers in New Brunswick must develop a code of practice for violence. Workplaces where certain types of work are being done or certain types of professions are engaged, regardless of the number of employees, must also develop a code. These include public service employees, health professionals, pharmacists, social workers, teachers, veterinarians, retail sales and home support services.

To help employers understand the new legislation, WorkSafeNB has developed a number of resources, including responses to frequently asked questions, sample templates for codes of practice, and sample templates for risk assessments.

We know legislation alone can't fix the problem of workplace harassment and violence, but it is an important step in helping reduce injuries and illness. It sends a strong message to New Brunswickers: we hear you, we support you, and we will not tolerate workplace harassment or violence of any kind.