

Working alone

This information sheet provides advice about identifying and controlling risks associated with working alone.

May 2011

Background

People who work alone face different levels of risk to others and WorkSafe receives regular enquiries about the implications of working alone.

'Working alone' is working anywhere a person is unable to get immediate assistance from colleagues or other people.

Common examples include:

- workers undertaking a sleepover shift at a refuge or residential unit
- workers visiting clients in their homes or undertaking outreach services in the community
- workers in duty or interview rooms
- workers accompanying clients to appointments after hours
- cleaners working by themselves in a city office building
- sales representatives, including real estate agents
- all-night convenience store and service station attendants
- transport freight and public transport drivers
- doctors, health and community workers
- rural and agricultural workers
- scientists, park rangers or others undertaking field work.

What to look out for?

Exposure to violence and poor access to emergency assistance are the two main hazards of working alone.

For example, a residential care worker working alone on night shift or an attendant working alone late at night in a 24-hour convenience store may be a greater target for exposure to violence, because they are by themselves.

Working alone can increase the severity of workplace injuries. For example, a park ranger who is bitten by a snake has an increased risk of severe consequences if they are working alone rather than with colleagues who can help.

These hazards can also be faced by people who work with colleagues.

What should employers do?

OHS laws require employers to eliminate or reduce risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Employers should identify and control the risks associated with the job (eg manual handling, plant and equipment, noise etc) and risks associated with working alone.

Employers must consult with health and safety representatives (HSRs) and workers, so far as is reasonably practicable. Consultation must occur when an employer:

- identifies or assesses risks
- makes decisions about ways to address risks
- makes decisions about providing information and training
- plans to change the way work is done.

To eliminate or reduce the risk of working alone, consider the following safety measures.

Buddy system – some jobs present such a high level of risk that workers should not be required to do the work alone. Occupations where violence has occurred before or where no information is available fall into this category.

Environmental design – workplaces and their surrounds can be designed to reduce the likelihood of violence. Environmental design features include:

- controlling access through installing effective barriers
- layout of client consultation rooms
- increased visibility
- monitored CCTV.

Design solutions need to be tailored to the specific workplace.

Communication or location systems – systems that can quickly locate workers or enable quick communication will help in directing assistance. Provide and maintain communication with workers in isolated environments (eg calling in or checking in regularly when support workers visit clients in their homes)

Employers should maintain continuous communication with workers working in the isolated environment of a confined space. Mine operators must also have a way of staying in constant communication with a worker who is working alone at an isolated location at a mine.

Some examples of communication or location systems are mobile or radio communications and global positioning systems (GPSs). The technology selected must always be supported by the infrastructure (eg not all rural areas have adequate coverage for all mobile phone technologies).

Alarms – such as duress alarms can also notify authorities of workplace emergencies.

Movement records – knowing where workers are expected to be can assist in managing risks. Examples are call in systems with supervisors or colleagues or using whiteboards at a base.

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Training – workers who deal with potentially violent clients alone need appropriate training. Workers in remote locations also need training in first aid.

Knowledge sharing – local, industry or client specific knowledge on where hazards and risks may arise can assist with good OHS planning. Flagging systems, briefings and log books can all help in making sure that knowledge is shared between employers and workers.

In most workplaces it is unlikely that one solution will be sufficient to deal with the risks of working alone. More than one solution will probably be required (eg combine using a mobile phone to stay in contact with base with training in dealing with aggressive clients).

Further Information

WorkSafe Advisory Service

Toll-free 1800 136 089

info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

worksafe.vic.gov.au

Related WorkSafe publications

Cleaning industry safety resource kit – hazard checklist, 2003

Real estate agent out-of-office safety, 2006

Prevention and management of aggression in health services, 2008

Working safely in visiting health services, 2006

Working safely in community services, 2006

WorkSafe OHS compliance kits – Children's services, disability services, home care, community support services

Volunteer health and safety – a handbook for community service organisations, 2008

This fact sheet provides information in relation to your health and safety obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act) only. It should not be viewed as a definitive guide to the law, and should be read in conjunction with the OHS Act. You should seek advice about other legal duties that may apply to your organisation.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and completeness of this fact sheet, the advice contained herein may not apply in every circumstance. Accordingly, the Victorian WorkCover Authority cannot be held responsible, and extends no warranties as to the suitability of the information for your specific circumstances; or actions taken by third parties as a result of information contained in this fact sheet.

Working alone risk assessment checklist

Before services are provided, employers should identify risks and put risk controls in place in consultation with health and safety representatives and workers.

These are some factors to consider when assessing the risks to health and safety of working alone. Some solutions will be for the hazards and risks of the particular job. Some solutions will be for the risks of working alone (see page 1).

Remember, there may be other hazards of the job (eg manual handling plant and equipment, noise etc).

Health and safety issue	Y/N	Solution (eg from the list on pages 1 and 2 or your risk assessment for this job)
The nature of the work		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it appropriate for the worker to be alone whilst carrying out particular work activities (eg a standby person may be required where work is proceeding in a confined space) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there adequate information and instruction for the worker to be able to work alone safely? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there risk of violence from other people (eg clients, patients or members of the public)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there hazards associated with the machinery, tools and equipment that may be used? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there high risk activity (eg work at heights, work with electricity, work with hazardous substances or work with hazardous equipment, such as chainsaws or firearms)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is fatigue likely to increase risk (eg with long hours driving a vehicle or operating machinery)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the worker likely to be exposed to extremes of temperature? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there risk of attack by an animal? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there an effective system for checking that all protective clothing and equipment and emergency equipment is packed and in good working order? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the worker is working inside a locked building, will emergency services be able to gain access if the worker is unable to let them in (eg night cleaners who work alone)? 		
The location of the work		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the work in a location which increases the risk of violence to workers (eg from people affected by drugs or alcohol or in high crime areas)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is lighting in entrances and exits to buildings and parking areas adequate? 		

More information about Working alone

Health and safety issue	Y/N	Solution (eg from the list on pages 1 and 2 or your risk assessment for this job)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have aspects of building design been addressed, such as access barriers and clear lines of sight? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are security measures adequate, including alarm maintenance and testing scheduling, video or patrols? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the work in a remote location? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the form of transport increase the risk (ie the level of risk may vary with different types of vehicles, two, three or four wheel bikes or other forms of transport)? 		
First aid and emergencies		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there procedures in place for post-incident management, for example, debriefing or counselling? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is first aid equipment available for immediate treatment (eg a first aid kit in the vehicle)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the level of first aid training required to use the first aid equipment adequate? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If first aid equipment is vehicle-based, are there arrangements to cover the worker when they are away from the vehicle? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there arrangements for dealing with a vehicle breakdown? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the vehicle fitted with emergency supplies, such as adequate drinking water? 		
The length of time the worker may be working alone		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will the worker need to be alone to finish this job? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a reasonable time for the worker to be alone been identified? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is it safe for the worker to be alone at all? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The time of day when the worker may be working alone 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there increased risk at certain times of day (eg some workers may be more exposed to violence on evening and night shifts)? 		
Communication		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the worker have access to a communications system (eg mobile or satellite phones, alarm systems)? 		

More information about Working alone

Health and safety issue	Y/N	Solution (eg from the list on pages 1 and 2 or your risk assessment for this job)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will the emergency communication or alarm system work properly in all situations? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there procedures for regular contact with the worker who works alone? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are workers authorised to contact emergency services directly? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is voice communication essential for the safety of the worker? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If communication systems are vehicle-based, are there arrangements to cover the worker when they are away from the vehicle? 		
The training of the worker		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the worker had training to prepare them for working alone and, where applicable, in remote locations (eg training on dealing with aggressive people, training on how and when to withdraw on assessing risk, for first aid, OHS policies and procedures, vehicle breakdowns, communications systems and bush survival)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the worker trained to drive a vehicle in off-road situations where applicable? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the worker speak English or is there anything that would interfere with his or her ability to communicate with someone in an emergency? 		
Knowledge sharing		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there procedures to ensure knowledge of workers' whereabouts (eg clients' addresses, expected arrival and return times)? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there procedures for incident reporting so that all workers are aware of local risks (eg clients' history of violence)? 		
Is there anything else that applies to your situation that is likely to increase risk for the worker who works alone?		