

## Securing your hospital in a *family and friends* environment

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*How does the healthcare security professional protect patients, staff and visitors from harm in the face of a Family and Friends philosophy espoused by many hospitals, a philosophy marked by less restrictive visiting hours, free movement throughout the facility, extended dining hours in the cafeterias and a general feeling of openness? How are security professionals expected to deal with an increase in threats of violence in such a restriction-free environment? In this article the author proposes a number of ways to secure a facility under such challenging circumstances.*

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The frequency and level of violent incidents in healthcare settings are at an all-time high. Over the past decade, hospitals across the nation have been subject to an alarming increase in violent incidents. In the last five years alone, there has been a nearly 300 percent increase in the number of reported homicides, assaults and rapes over the previous five years (*Homeland Security Newswire, January 12, 2012*). More and more, leadership looks to its security professionals to alleviate concerns and quell fears. In the current economic climate, security departments are already faced with "doing more with less." This difficult task is compounded by the special environment of hospitals that have adopted the *Family and Friends* philosophy, marked by less restrictive visiting hours, free movement throughout the facility, extended dining hours in the cafeterias and a general feeling of openness. How are security pro-

professionals expected to deal with an increase in threats of violence in such a restriction-free environment? Just as undertaken in the approach to budgetary constraints, security leaders must think outside the box to find innovative ways to secure their facility under such challenging circumstances.

### **FORCE MULTIPLIER**

In a recent conversation with the director of security at one of our larger hospitals, I asked what the current size of his uniform force was. "You would be surprised. It is not the number you see outlined in my budget," the director explained. "It is actually a few thousand strong." Each and every employee at his hospital is asked to maintain a security-conscious mindset. Situational awareness is the key. Employees remain aware of their surroundings and act upon anything out of the ordinary. If staff members see someone suspicious in a sensitive area such as Labor and Delivery, they are encouraged to challenge him or her. We certainly do not want employees confronting anyone they are uncomfortable with, but we always have expected staff to be of

assistance. "Can I help you?" is certainly not intimidating and generally hospitable. People who are lost or simply taking a walk would not be at all uncomfortable explaining their situation. However, individuals with surreptitious intentions would now realize there are far more eyes on them than the ones they see in the CCTV lens.

Thinking back to the middle of my law enforcement career, I recall when the concept of community-oriented policing evolved. Whole communities were encouraged and empowered to act to improve their collective safety. Utility companies were called upon to immediately repair faulty street lights, broken windows on houses were quickly boarded up and residents of neighborhoods were encouraged to use nonemergency police phone numbers to report suspicious activity. Does your hospital have a nonemergency (no code) phone number that staff can call to report "out of the ordinary" situations or suspicious people to Security? Security departments would prefer to respond to several false alarms and know that among those responses potential incidents may have been

prevented. Whole hospital communities must be engaged in the security of their workplace.

### **ENHANCED IDENTIFICATION PRACTICES**

Practically every hospital has a system in place regarding employee identification as well as accompanying policies and practices. Generally, staff are expected to wear photograph-enhanced identification badges whenever they are working or in the facility. Often this badge is directly connected to access control and other software-enhanced protective measures. Observing employees with the badge worn at waist level or turned around because they don't like their picture (which often dates back several years from when the employee was first hired) is a regular occurrence.

Many of the pitfalls of identification badges can be avoided by implementing the practice of reissuing identification every year on the team member's anniversary date of hire. There are a myriad of benefits relating to security countermeasures that can be gained from implementing this practice. Annual badge issuing means a

current picture of the employee is taken, likely leading to less apprehension about an "old" picture being prominently displayed. At the same time, Security has the opportunity to both purge any out-of-date badges as well as review and update employee access parameters (does the former nuclear medicine tech who has been promoted to an administrative position still need access to the "hot" lab?). The badge software and equipment are already in place. The minimal cost of the material is well worth the gains in protective measures that can be achieved.

The feeling of an open, welcoming facility does not mean identification procedures are limited to our own personnel. Even in such an environment, the unobtrusive utilization of visitor management systems is still very feasible. A staffed podium with VM software can serve the dual role of processing facility visitors for identification and temporary picture passes, while also providing the feeling of a concierge style service capable of answering a visitor's questions or supplying directions. Screening is occurring concurrently with, yet camouflaged by

greetings. The additional attributes of today's visitor management systems add vendor/contractor tracking components. Security has the realistic ability to remain relatively "out of the way" while still having a behind the scenes, yet accurate picture of everyone inside the facility. Patients, staff, visitors, vendor and contractors are now all identified--those that do not belong will stand out clearly.

### **HEALTHCARE WORKPLACE SAFETY**

Security must take a lead role in teaching staff awareness level skills to recognize and respond to aggressive behavior. Violent incidents in a healthcare setting can be random and without warning. However, the perpetrators of many such acts often fit a recognizable profile that our co-workers can be taught to identify. Coupled with this heightened sense of awareness must be the path to resolution. This can involve an overview of crisis-intervention techniques, interpersonal skills and a multitude of proven de-escalation techniques.

Staff members must be empowered by Security to defend them-

selves--not in the typical self-defense manner, but in recognition of escalating aggressive behavior and powerful techniques to defuse violent encounters before they even start. We teach healthcare security officers the importance of interpersonal skills and de-escalation, and we need to continue that trend among as many caregivers as we can. Few of us have the resources to allow for staff attendance at a 40-hour formal program. De-escalation techniques can be consolidated into an abbreviated program, or reviews and discussions at regular staff meetings can suffice to get the momentum moving across the whole team.

Admittedly, we have little control over the random, premeditated acts of violence in our facilities. We can, however, accept a philosophy of arming our staff with all the tools available to diffuse, and ultimately stop, the violence before it happens. Remember, these are compassionate helpers, many of whom already possess and use these techniques on a daily basis when dealing with an apprehensive patient or grieving family. With a little refinement, we can extend their

healing touch to the prevention of workplace violence.

## CONCLUSION

The challenging environment created by the *Family and Friends* philosophy embraced by today's hospitals places the healthcare security professional in a unique situation. He or she is expected to protect patients, staff and visitors from harm, without the luxury of implementing more

aggressive countermeasures. Due to the compassionate service we provide, airport-like security features delay and detract from our ability to deliver expeditious care. Metal detectors, screening procedures and an abundance of uniformed staff are not practices most healthcare executives would embrace in their facility. Healthcare security must continue to be innovative and meet the growing risk of violence in hospitals.