

## Workplace Suicides Increase

***While the number of on-the-job fatalities continues to decline, the number of workplace suicides jumped by double-digits in the latest federal report. The stress of today's economy is definitely a cause, experts say. HR leaders must be on the lookout for warning signs and offer compassion and help.***

By *David Shadovitz*

Employers should be able to take some comfort in a recent preliminary report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that shows an ongoing decline in workplace fatalities over the past year. But the agency's data points to at least one troubling trend: A double-digit jump in the number of suicides occurring in the workplace.

According to BLS's *Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries*, suicides in the workplace climbed by 28 percent between 2007 and 2008 – from 196 to 251. For the most part, the incidents took place at work or while the individual was working, but some may have occurred outside the workplace or "off the clock" if a relationship with work could be established.

The BLS wouldn't speculate on what factors led to the higher numbers of suicides in 2008, noting that it's often "multi-causal in nature" and is therefore difficult to determine. But experts interviewed by *HREOnline*™ agree that the economic downturn most likely played a prominent role.

"Clearly, the economy is behind these numbers," says Lynne Eisaguirre, president of Workplaces That Work, a Boulder, Colo.-based consultancy. "It's a powder keg in the workplace these days. People who are left are working harder; they're terrified of being laid off. Many have family members who were laid off."

Eisaguirre points out that studies historically have shown that between 10 percent and 20 percent of workers have mental-health issues anyway, "so when you add the kind of stress that's occurring today in the workplace, it's not surprising that suicides could result."

The profile of those most likely to take their lives at work closely resembles that of previous years, according to the BLS data. Of the 251 workplace suicides that occurred in 2008, 94 percent were committed by men and 78 percent were white. Workers between the ages of 45 and 54 accounted for the age group with the highest number of suicides (36 percent).

In 2008, workers in management jobs accounted for the largest group of suicides, roughly 14 percent. Transportation and material-handling, sales and protective-services occupations, meanwhile, each accounted for 10 percent of incidents.

Nearly 80 percent of the suicides happened in private industry, with most of those occurring in the service sector. Protective-service occupations experienced the largest jump in suicides from 2007 to 2008 – increasing from 14 to 25 fatalities. Police officers represented about one-third of this group.

More than one out of every two (52 percent) workplace suicides involved guns, a jump of 48 percent from the year before. Asphyxiation, strangulation or suffocation accounted for about 31 percent of the incidences.

Richard Chaifetz, chairman and CEO of ComPsych, a provider of global employee-assistance programs, says he isn't surprised by the increase. "If anything, the numbers are probably on the low side," he says. "Considering the environment of increased job losses, it's not surprising people are taking their lives."

Chaifetz also points out that the BLS's numbers don't reflect those workers who attempted to take their lives at work but didn't succeed, noting that he believes those numbers too have increased since the start of the recession.

It's not by chance that these workers are choosing to take their lives at work, Chaifetz and other experts say.

"There's an implied message in where one chooses to kill themselves," Chaifetz says. "If it occurs in the workplace, it could be a reflection of the frustration they're feeling with their employer or maybe their co-workers."

Eisaguirre agrees that those who take their lives at work typically are trying to make a statement about the workplace. "Psychologists say suicide is not just a desperate act, but also a hostile one," she says. "So it's not surprising that someone who feels hostility to the workplace would choose to express their hostility there."

Believing that layoffs have contributed to the trend, experts note that HR leaders are in a unique position to do something about it because of the role they play in corporate downsizings.

"Companies may have little choice but to make those decisions, but they need to do it in a compassionate way," says Jeff Gorter, an account executive with Crisis Care Network, a Grand Rapids, Mich.-based provider of critical-incident-response services. "They need to be able to send a message that the company cares about you as a person."

HR leaders, Gorter adds, should also be on the lookout for warning signs. "We know that if people made an attempt in the past, they're more likely to make an attempt in the future," he says. "If they're going through a personal crisis, then maybe you can help connect them with someone who can help."

Such efforts can pay off, he says, even if a person decides not to seek help through a counselor. "It communicates that the company is humane and cares," he says. "It also lets people know that they have other options – that choices are available to them."

In sharp contrast to the suicide data, the preliminary BLS report reveals a continuing decline in the number of workplace fatalities. In 2008, fatal work injuries declined to 3.6 fatalities per 100,000 workers, down from 4.0 in 2007.

A BLS spokesman says a final report is expected to be released **next spring**.

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