

Workplace Violence Testimony

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I have been with SVMC in the Emergency Department for 20 years. Throughout the course of my career here we have seen our fair share of challenges. When looking back at those challenges, one thing is for sure, nothing that I have seen or dealt with compares to the current state of our Emergency Department or other departments throughout our beautiful state. In fact, I have never once thought about leaving Emergency Medicine and have always said that this environment is part of who I am. That is until the last 12 months. I have pondered leaving the ED and in fact, on the most difficult days I have had thoughts about leaving the nursing profession all together.

In 2020, when the pandemic hit, nurses and other healthcare professionals were hailed heroes. The country practically rolled out red carpets. They showered healthcare workers with gifts, food, public displays of support, and generously donated protective equipment. Now here I stand, in front of you, in 2023 telling you that those same people are now using nurses as punching bags.

Nurses in emergency departments are there on your worst day. They are there to hold your hand when you are injured or ill. They sit with you and review the options the physician has provided you, they help you understand all of the medical jargon, they cry with you after you have been told that your child, your mother, your spouse, or your friend has died. When you walk into the Emergency room, it is the nurse that identifies your life-threatening condition, and swiftly jumps into action to ensure you have the best chance of survival. What we do is step into your life changing event and walk alongside of you lighting your path and sometimes even carrying you when you are in your darkest moments.

Workplace violence has always been an issue. However, the incidences have dramatically increased over the past 3 years. Not only the number but the severity. Though COVID forced hospitals to be more nimble it has now left them in a vulnerable and frankly unsafe position. In the current state hospitals and medical practices lack capacity and the only place people know to go or can go is the ED. Due to no fault of their own, Emergency Departments are beyond capacity every day. There are no skilled nursing beds for your grandmother that you can no

longer take care of, there are no pediatric intensive care beds for your child within a 6 hour radius of your home, there are no ambulances to transport your husband to a major medical center for a lifesaving stent when he has a heart attack, and there is absolutely no coordinated mental health services in this state. This forces ED's to board patients for hours, days, or weeks. All this leading to an increase risk for violence.

In the past, healthcare workers, who by State law are classified as "protected" were made to feel guilty for calling the police when they were the victim of violence in the workplace. They were interrogated and informed that because they did not sustain severe physical injury there was nothing that could be done. Or, the patient had a mental health diagnosis therefore would not be held responsible for their actions. Pursuing legal action often only led to further traumatizing the healthcare worker. Once healthcare workers began to realize how ridiculous this thought process was they began to take a stand. Healthcare workers have come together to acknowledge that they are victims in a system where they have to continue to be victimized because offenders are allowed to languish in Emergency Departments or other clinical settings without consequences for their actions. That stand that they are taking is what has finally led us to today. A well overdue conversation. Incidents of workplace violence not only threaten the safety of the healthcare team and the patient, they threaten the safety of an entire community. These situations often require multiple staff members and in a small ED like SVMC it can take the entire clinical and security team to keep everyone safe. That means we have an entire department full of other patients left unattended. This might be one of your family members and the doctor that they so desperately need to see is currently being assaulted across the hallway.

I have been spit at, kicked, bit, had my hair pulled, been sexually harassed, had my life threatened, and on one occasion I was being tracked by a patient who had threatened my life with a weapon that was later recovered in his vehicle after he was brought to the ED on a mental health warrant related to a threat to commit a mass shooting in our local community. Let me be clear, this man was brought to the ED by 4 ARMED police officers, the community was put on lockdown, and law enforcement agencies across the state were called upon. However, this grown man was dropped in my ED with a team of 6 nurses. Not a single one of them weighing over 130lbs. He proceeded to terrorize our staff for days before a mental health facility would even consider accepting him. Shortly after his release from a very brief stay on an inpatient unit he began to show up in places where I was. This included a dirt road near the driveway to my home. The home I was in with 2 small children. Although, I had been reassured his weapons has been taken, you and I both know how easy it is to access lethal means.

Imagine this, your daughter has committed her entire adult life to caring for others. She goes into one of the most trusted professions in the country and she calls you because she had to meet with a police officer to learn “tactics” to keep her safe. I was instructed to never walk unattended to my car, never drive home the same way twice, grocery shop out of town, and not to bring my children into public spaces until the “dust settled.” I guarantee you would be demanding action. All of this simply because I showed up to my NURSING job.

My career has led me into a leadership role. As the nursing director of an ED I take full responsibility for the safety and well-being of every staff members that reports to me. They often look to me in the most extreme cases to create a plan for their safety. Handling incidences of workplace violence when we have limited to know recourse are devastating to our team and me as their leader. Another incidence was when I was called one early weekend morning. The staff member was crying and clearly distraught. He informed me that he wasn't sure how the team was going to get through the shift and the nurses were ready to walk out. An individual was brought to our ED, again by 6 armed officers, on a mental health warrant. He has history of mental illness, multiple assaults on healthcare workers and his family. These assaults have been career ending for some and on one occasion nearly fatal. He was left in our where we have limited psychiatric support, and deemed in need of involuntary treatment. He terrorized the clinical team for over 12 hours. Sexually harassing the female staff members, using hate speech towards a staff member due to his gender identity, made threats to kill specific individuals while making gestures with his hands like he would shoot or strangle them. When I arrived to the ED, the department was full of patient in need of emergency care. The staff were trying their best but clearly distracted and fearful for their safety. The nurse that met me at the door said, “You have to do something or I can't stay here. I have children at home and I need to go home alive today.” After multiple calls I was informed there was no available law enforcement in the State to support our team. When I met with the patient the first thing he said to me was, “Today is your day to die.” After hours and multiple phone calls the police department was given permission to remove this individual from the ED. However, the damage was done. We almost lost multiple nurses on this day.

Every time we lose an ED nurse it takes 9-12 months and at minimum \$150,000 to replace them. Losing just one nurse is crippling for our ED. Not only does it take time and money, nothing can replace experience. We can no longer and will no longer tolerate this violence inflicted on us each and every day. Every day I walk out of that ED and wonder which one of my co-workers will be injured that night. This is not acceptable and we need your help to ensure that violent offenders can be removed from the ED and ensure there are consequences for their actions.