

The Issue

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health care field has experienced an increase in workplace violence. The pandemic has placed significant stress on the entire health care system, and unfortunately, in some situations, patients, visitors and family members have attacked health care staff and jeopardized our workforce's ability to provide care. Hospitals, health systems and their employees have expressed a strong interest in the enactment of a federal law that would protect health care workers from violence and intimidation, just as current federal law protects airline and airport workers.

Background

Hospitals and health systems have long had robust protocols in place to detect and deter violence against their team members. Since the onset of the pandemic, however, violence against hospital employees has markedly increased — and there is no sign it is receding.

Day after day, the media reports about patients or family members physically or verbally abusing hospital staff. For example, a patient recently grabbed a nurse in Georgia by the wrist and kicked her in the ribs.¹ A nurse in South Dakota was thrown against a wall and bitten by a patient.² A medical student in New York who came from Thailand was called “China Virus,” kicked, and dragged to the ground, leaving her hands bleeding and legs bruised.³

Data supports these news reports. Recent studies indicate, for example, that 44% of nurses reported experiencing physical violence and 68% reported experiencing verbal abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Workplace violence has severe consequences for the entire health care system. Not only does violence cause physical and psychological injury for health care workers, workplace violence and intimidation make it more difficult for nurses, doctors and other clinical staff to provide quality patient care. Nurses and physicians cannot provide attentive care when they are afraid for their personal safety, distracted by disruptive patients and family members, or traumatized from prior violent interactions. In addition, violent interactions at health care facilities tie up valuable resources and can delay urgently needed care for other patients. Studies show that workplace violence reduces patient satisfaction and employee productivity, and increases the potential for adverse medical events.

AHA Take

Despite the incidence of workplace violence and its harmful effects on our health care system, no federal law protects health care employees from workplace assault or intimidation. By contrast, there are federal laws on the books criminalizing assault and intimidation against airline employees, and Attorney General Merrick Garland recently directed Department of Justice prosecutors to prioritize prosecutions under that statute given the rise in violent behavior on commercial aircraft during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vigorous enforcement of these federal laws creates a safe traveling environment, deters violent behavior, and ensures that offenders are appropriately punished. Our nation's health care workers who have tirelessly helped care for and treat the sick and dying while facing increased violence — especially during the last two years of the pandemic — deserve the same legal protections as airline workers. **Congress should enact the Safety from Violence for Healthcare Employees (SAVE) Act (H.R. 7961), which provides protections similar to those that exist for flight crews, flight attendants and airport workers.**

¹ Shoshana Ungerleider and Sarah Warren, Nurses get spit on, kicked, assaulted. Stop hurting us. We are here to help you, USA Today (Jan. 10, 2022), www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2022/01/10/covid-nurses-assaulted-pandemic/9117731002/?gnt-cfr=1.

² Bart Pfankuch, Rising anger and violence toward health care workers hampering patient care in South Dakota, Argus Leader (Feb. 28, 2022), www.argusleader.com/story/news/2022/02/28/rising-anger-violence-toward-healthcare-workers-hurt-patient-care/6922874001/.

³ Sydney Pereira, 'White Coats Don't Protect Us:' Asian Health Care Workers Speak Out Against Rise In Hate Crimes, Gothamist (Apr. 22, 2021), gothamist.com/news/white-coats-dont-protect-us-asian-health-care-workers-speak-out-against-rise-in-hate-crimes.