

Staying Safe When You Work Alone

Working alone can be defined as working “in circumstances where assistance would not be readily available to the worker”.¹ Under this definition, many health and community services workers in Nova Scotia work alone, as part of their normal day-to-day work duties. Whether working in an isolated part of the hospital or in a client’s home, these workers can be vulnerable, since it may be more difficult for them to get help if their health or safety is at risk.

Nova Scotia doesn’t currently have a specific working alone regulation. This doesn’t mean that the hazards of working alone can be ignored. In fact, the Occupational health and Safety Division of Nova Scotia Labour and Workforce Development has stated that employers need to have specific procedures and safeguards for working alone.² And while working alone is a concern for all health and community service workplaces, the risks are greatest for staff who work in the homes of patients and clients.

The homes of clients pose a unique health and safety challenge for home care and community services organizations and workers. Unlike a traditional workplace, it can be very difficult to control hazards and reduce risk for workers providing care in these homes. Employers and workers both need to understand how they can, both separately and by working closely together, reduce the risks of working alone.

When workers are required to work alone their employers need to establish working alone policies and provide training on these policies. These policies should address issues such as notifying supervisors of work plans and locations, frequency of contact with supervisors, actions to be taken when workers feel that their health and safety is threatened, and processes for investigating and addressing worker concerns.

Working alone policies should outline when supervisors are to be contacted and the information workers should pass on to them. For instance, supervisors should be contacted before workers enter a client’s home. They should know the client’s name, address, telephone number and condition, and the actual start time an expected length of visit. The policy should also require workers to contact their supervisor as soon as they are in a safe location after the visit is complete.

Of course, just having a working alone policy is not enough. Home care a community services workers need the knowledge and skills to recognize situation of increased risk and to respond appropriately. They need to be trained to recognize hazards such as: aggressive pets, patients who may become violent due to alcohol or drug abuse or dementia, cluttered and/or poorly maintained walkways, unsafe stairs, poorly lighted entrances, etc. These workers also need to be aware of how furniture, room layout, and equipment might increase their risk when mobilizing or repositioning clients. They must know how to report hazards and the steps to take when hazards cannot be controlled.

Home care and community services workers need to understand and follow their organization's work alone, violence prevention and other related policies. They should be up to date on the condition of their patient/client, and of any changes in the home (e.g. pets, visitors, family members, etc.). These workers also need to take the time to identify hazards and assess the situation each and every time a visit is made to a home. They should do an initial scan of the home, walkway, entrance, etc. They should pay close attention to how patients talk to them when they arrive and rely on their sense of smell and hearing. This information, combined with their past experiences with the client should be used to assess the level of risk.

With an ever increasing need for care services to be provided in the home, home care and community services organizations need to make sure that their employees are safe when they work alone. Home care and community services workers must be ready and able to identify hazards and assess the risks when working in the homes of their clients and patients. Ultimately, however, because these workers are alone or isolated, they need to trust their instincts and get to a safe location as soon as they feel in any way threatened. This can only happen when they have confidence that actions taken to protect their health and safety will be fully supported by their employer.

1. B.C. Reg. 296/97, including amendments up to B.C. Reg. 258/2008, September 1, 2009, Section 4.20.1

Health and safety guide for retail workers, pgs 12 & 20, Occupational Health and Safety Division, Nova Scotia Labour and Workforce Development, 2008