

How to Protect Workers Who Do Their Jobs Off-Site



Protecting workers becomes especially challenging when they do their jobs away from your plant, facility, or office. That includes site workers who travel on business as well as mobile workers out in the field such as real estate agents, social workers, home care nurses, drivers, messengers, and salespeople. Here's a Game Plan to ensure compliance with your OHS obligations to protect off-site workers.

Off-Site Workers Are Vulnerable

Travelling and working off-site makes workers especially vulnerable, particularly to attacks and acts of violence. Since they're cut off from "base," field workers are also harder to help after incidents occur. The danger is even greater when the worker works alone or in isolation. Actual examples:

- A 50-year-old Ontario salesman is found dead in his New York City hotel room after apparently dying of a heart attack 4 days earlier—why didn't anybody at the company try to contact him, his widow, and her trial lawyer want to know.
- Two female executives are raped in their hotel rooms during a business trip to Johannesburg, South Africa.
- A home care nurse is brutally attacked by a patient during a visit to his home.

- A lab courier smashes his van into a tree, is knocked unconscious, and bleeds to death before anybody finds him.

OHS Law Requirements to Protect Off-Site Workers

OHS laws require employers to ensure their workers a safe and healthy place to work and guard them from dangerous machines, chemicals, confined spaces, and other hazards **in the workplace**. What sometimes gets overlooked is that this duty also extends to job hazards that are outside the employer's physical facility. There are 2 reasons for this.

Definition of Worker

OHS laws protect “workers” or “employees.” That clearly includes salespersons, home care nurses and other field workers in the company's employment. In fact, in some provinces including Ontario, Alberta, and Québec, the employer has a duty to protect persons performing services on its behalf even if it doesn't have an actual employment relationship with them.

Definition of Workplace

The OHS laws address hazards in the [“workplace” or “worksites,”](#) which is defined broadly to include not just the employer's facility but also the off-site locations where workers are normally expected to perform their employment duties, including any vessel, vehicle, or powered mobile equipment they use on the job.

The 7 Things Employers Must Do to

Protect Off-Site Workers

So, what do employers have to do to protect off-site workers? The best way to answer that question is to look at [OHS requirements for protecting workers who work alone or in isolation](#). Specifically, employers must create and implement a [written plan or policy](#) that includes 7 elements, each of which would pertain to off-site workers who are in the field but not alone.

1. Risk Assessment

The first step is to recognize that working alone or off-site is a potential danger that, like other workplace hazards, requires a risk assessment. Such an assessment should be carried out by a competent person and consider the particular job involved. For example, a risk assessment for a home care nurse needs to identify the risks of going into patients' homes alone, collection agencies need to consider the risk that temper tantrums pose to their agents, etc. Risk assessments must also be periodically reviewed and revised.

Example: Three oil workers are camped out in a remote part of an Alberta oil field when an alarm sounds from a nearby compressor building. One of the workers gets up and goes to the building to check out the problem. He loosens a pipe and allows toxic hydrogen sulfide vapours to escape. Several hours later, he's found dead of asphyxiation on the floor. The victim didn't bring his gas detection equipment with him as he had been trained to do. The oil company pleads guilty to not updating its working alone hazard assessment in violation of the Alberta OHS regulations and pays \$105,000 in fines [*R. v. Burlington Resources Canada Ltd.*].

2. Training

Individuals who work alone or off-site should receive

education and training in the dangers they may face, including field workers, must be trained to handle the dangers they may face. Such training would include dealing with the risk of assault, robbery and threats of violence, as well as how to call for help and get first aid treatment for an injury or illness from an off-site location. Keep [records documenting the training](#) you provide.

3. Monitoring

Employers should have a [system for regularly checking on workers](#) when they're off-site, especially if they're alone or isolated. The nature and frequency of required checks will depend on the degree of danger involved. For example, social workers dealing with emotionally disturbed and potentially violent clients need to be checked at closer intervals than salespeople driving to an office building to meet with business clients.

4. Method of Calling for Help

Employers must ensure that workers who work alone, isolation or off-site have a means of calling or signaling for help. If necessary, you must furnish them phones, radios and other forms of electronic communication equipment. Alberta and Saskatchewan require the use of radio, telephone, or other forms of electronic communication.

5. First Aid Equipment & Supplies

Off-site workers must have access to [appropriate first aid equipment and supplies](#), depending on the jobs they do, where they do it and whether they work alone. Many jurisdictions require employers to ensure that there are first aid kits and instructions in company vehicles. It may also be advisable to provide vehicle first aid kits and instructions for off-site workers who use their own vehicles.

6. Safe Work Practices

You should develop and ensure workers are trained in and follow safe work practices for working alone or off-site. Examples might include “[buddy systems](#)” to ensure workers are paired with at least co-worker at all times, as well as and procedures for communicating with headquarters, using communication equipment, carrying appropriate supplies, and planning an escape route.

7. Off-Site Inspections

If reasonably practicable, employers should perform regular safety inspections of roadways, facilities, offices, and other off-site locations where workers will be expected to perform their job duties. That would include inspecting the home office of a worker who’s telecommuting.

Don’t Forget to Protect Telecommuters

Keep in mind that in most jurisdictions, the OHS duty to protect workers who work off-site either extends or likely extends to [telecommuters who work from home or another remote location](#). The exceptions:

- In Ontario and Yukon, the *OHS Act* doesn’t apply to “work performed by the owner or occupant. . . in or about a private residence”.
- In New Brunswick, the *OHS Act* doesn’t apply to a place of employment that’s a private home unless the work is done by a contractor.
- In Manitoba, a person isn’t considered a “worker” unless “he works or performs services in a workplace which is owned or operated by the person who engages him to perform services.”