

Social Sector Safety Forum report

DECEMBER 2

Government
Health & Safety Lead

Social Sector Safety forum

This report describes the key findings from the Social Sector Safety Forum. Agencies are encouraged to consider these findings when reviewing current controls and activity already in place to reduce the likelihood and impact of violence and aggression within their agency. This report also describes the broader application of some of the findings that will be explored further by the Government Health and Safety Lead.

Background

In 2019, the Public Service Commission and Public Service Association (PSA) asked the Government Health and Safety Lead (GHSL) to facilitate a Social Sector Forum, bringing together the PSA and Oranga Tamariki, Department of Corrections, Department of Conservation, Accident Compensation Corporation, Police, Ministry of Social Development, and Kāinga Ora to discuss whether effective systems are in place to address the physical and psychological risks for staff associated with service delivery.

This work was requested in response to concerns reported by PSA members regarding an increase in negative and sometimes threatening behaviour of clients and the public towards public servants delivering social services, both in-person and online via social media. It was agreed that there would be value in bringing together agency operational leaders and their PSA representatives to share good practice and identify any new approaches to manage the physical and psychological risks relating to violent and aggressive behaviour towards workers.

The GHSL facilitated discussions with agency and PSA representatives over three Social Sector Forum workshops. Attendees varied across the workshops to include operational leads, health and safety managers, and practitioners, with the purpose of understanding different perspectives and insights of how the risks from violence and aggression are currently managed, and to identify gaps and opportunities.

The workshops broadly explored the various controls in place to manage the risk of violence and aggression across a number of scenarios and environments, as well as any monitoring, reporting and assurance mechanisms in place.

Key insights from the workshops and supplementary information provided by agencies to the GHSL have been collated to form three respective meta-bowties (**see Appendix A**) for three specific risk scenarios, these are: physical harm in uncontrolled environments, physical harm in controlled environments, and psychological harm. This information can be used by agencies to explore whether additional controls may be appropriate and should be considered.

The GHSL has considered some of the key findings more broadly, taking a sector-wide lens to the development of a programme of work (inclusive of the social sector) in relation to our four-year plan which currently identifies violence and aggression as a common critical risk and common focus area for the sector.

Workshop key findings

The workshops revealed a range of controls already in place within most agencies. An observation was that these are largely weighted towards personal protective equipment and administrative controls, such as tactical communication training, on-body-cameras, and various safety protocols, which are least effective on the hierarchy of controls (see figure 1). The specific controls are detailed within **Appendix A**.

The agency and PSA representatives explored how the sector may meaningfully improve the way we manage the risk of violence and aggression, particularly focusing on introducing more effective controls that could reduce the reliance on lower-level controls such as personal protective equipment. The discussions largely centred on system-level preventative controls that seek to “design the risk out” of how work is done (e.g. providing a service online vs. face to face will eliminate the risk of physical assault), or address the common factors that regularly contribute to a negative client experience and client frustration that may instigate violence and aggression.

These are detailed in the potential focus areas below.

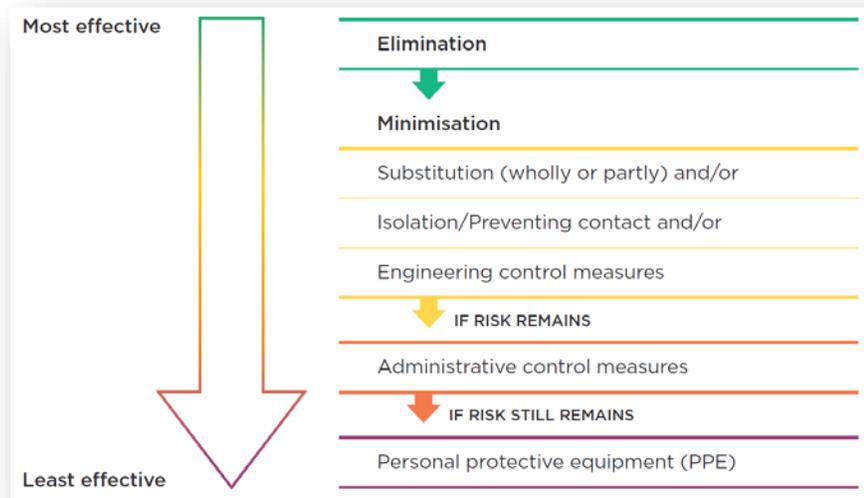


Figure 1. Hierarchy of Controls – WorkSafe New Zealand

Potential focus areas

The workshops highlighted a range of areas that agencies may consider exploring as part of their efforts to improve how they manage violence and aggression. The Government Health and Safety Lead will also explore some of the following initiatives as part of our 2021 work programme.

Defining the risk and tolerance threshold

There is no clear or consistent definition within agencies (or across the sector) of what constitutes violence and aggression, and there is a high degree of variability between and within agencies of thresholds for disengaging with a client, seeking support, and reporting internally within an agency and/or externally to other agencies (e.g. Police). Repeated exposure to violent and aggressive behaviour can lead to normalisation within workers and (at an individual level), increased tolerance toward unacceptable behaviour. This may contribute to underreporting and could prevent other potentially affected parties being notified.

Supporting agencies to clearly define the behaviour(s) and tolerance thresholds will remove the sole reliance on worker-perception to determine risk; this will enable consistency with how violence and aggression is managed within an agency, but also at what point a risk-level is exceeded, requiring notification to the Police and/or other agencies. This will be the primary area of focus for the Government Health and Safety Lead programme of work as it will enable subsequent initiatives which are dependent on clear definitions and thresholds existing.

Recommendation: the GHSL will commence a programme of work with an initial focus on supporting agencies to define risk and tolerance thresholds for reporting at a sector-level; agencies are requested to nominate a representative practitioner to work with GHSL and initiate the implementation within their agency.

Inter-agency information sharing

Public sector agencies currently have limited or no visibility of shared clients and do not have access to information another agency may hold regarding shared clients who may pose a risk of violent or aggressive behaviour (although, in many cases, agencies will report threats of physical violence to Police and/or other agencies). The workshops suggested that exploring a system in which agencies can share information on high-risk clients and/or generalised level of risk for a client or location would enable a more informed and tailored approach to risk management.

An information sharing pilot had previously been explored by the GHSL and two sector workshops were facilitated by the Department of Internal Affairs Innovation Lab. Despite a technology solution existing to support this initiative the main barrier was the lack of inconsistent definitions and frameworks to assess risk, the lack of thresholds for reporting, data collection, and reporting within agencies. This would need to be the focus of future work prior to any structured information sharing initiative to proceed.

Recommendation: the GHSL will revisit this initiative on behalf of the sector on completion of the necessary work by agencies to enable the collection data. This requires agencies to undertake work alongside the GHSL to define the risk and consistently report on risk-levels that meet or exceed the agreed sector threshold.

Training

De-escalation and tactical communications training has proven to be an effective mitigation control. The frequency of training and ability to practice scenarios/strategies are important considerations, as well as ensuring those who interact with clients or those who support them (e.g. receptionists, health and safety representatives) undertake appropriate training. Developing a range of shared training opportunities for public sector agencies would reduce duplication of effort and would streamline the use of resources.

The GHSL developed a de-escalation training package with WorkSafe Reps earlier this year and there are regular facilitated online workshops available via

www.worksafereps.co.nz

Recommendation: the GHSL will continue to facilitate access to this training. Agencies are encouraged to explore this training and other training options appropriate for the specific risks and roles within their agency.

Data collection and incident reporting (including near miss / high potential incidents)

Violence and aggression is currently under-reported or inconsistently reported across an agency and the sector. A large part of this may link to the lack of clear agency definition of violence and aggression and the thresholds for reporting – this will be the initial focus for the GHSL. Consistent tracking of incidents of violence and aggression within public sector agencies would enable improved reporting and assurance of controls. Additionally, this will help agencies to track exposure levels and effectively manage the cumulative effect of exposure, both physically and psychologically. Capturing ‘weak signals’ of increasing violence and aggression and worker exposure may help agencies to intervene sooner and more effectively.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to prioritise efforts in this area to enable sector-wide information sharing of high-risk clients. This may include reviewing current practices and systems to enable effective data collection and reporting.

Customer feedback

It was highlighted that public sector agencies do not necessarily provide an avenue for service-users to provide feedback on their experience with the agency service/system. This information may provide early indication of dissatisfaction of services and an increasing level of risk relating to particular clients. Providing avenues for clients to provide feedback may be a useful data source for weak signals of increased risk.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to consider how they may use new or existing systems and processes to gain client feedback of experiences and interactions with them as it pertains to weak signals or a level of threat for the agency.

Client-centric system/service design

A consistent theme throughout the workshops was that much of the violent and

aggressive behaviour towards public servants is directly attributed to clients' frustrations with our services and systems. Designing services and systems with the end-user in mind may reduce the likelihood of a negative experience which could lead to violent and aggressive behaviour. This includes the provision of accessible and user-friendly information to educate clients/service users on the roles and limitations of each agency's scope as part of broader managing of expectations about services, and the ease of access of the services. This was highlighted particularly in the findings of one agency during COVID-19 where they moved to a client-centric digitalised model of services which resulted in a significant decrease in service-dissatisfaction and threat of violence/aggression.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to consider how they may use information captured through client feedback channels, worker engagement, and other reporting mechanisms to support the design of systems and services to improve client experience.

Digitalisation of services

Several agencies reported a significant decrease in violence and aggression during COVID-19 due to the shift to an online model of service. Exploring how agencies may move to digitalised services that remain client-centric and accessible may be a useful avenue to explore in order to minimise the risk of physical harm by reducing unnecessary in-person contact. This should be considered as part of a broader review of the design of services.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to consider which services may be digitalised as part of a review of the client-centricity of their services.

Work design

Several agencies reported the workload demands on workers increased the risk of psychosocial harm. It was reported that client-facing workers often have repeated exposure to psychologically stressful tasks such as engaging with verbally and physically aggressive clients, or reviewing distressing materials. Exploring how public sector agencies can design capacity into their systems to minimise exposure / frequency of exposure to distressing materials or events may help to reduce the cumulative

psychological effects of the exposures. This may also enable workers to more effectively manage stress arising from their work once exposed.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to identify the roles that are exposed to psychologically stressful tasks (particularly where repeated exposure occurs) and consider how the design of work may be altered to reduce exposure.

Client advocacy

Several agencies highlighted the perceived power imbalance between the client and the agency, and that it can be problematic when an agency is acting as both the advocate and the service provider for the client. A suggestion from the workshops was that it could be useful to explore how the public sector could provide independent advocacy for those using agency services/systems may help to manage client experience and address factors which may lead to aggressive or violent behaviour by a client.

Recommendation: agencies are encouraged to consider external or independent avenues for client advocacy when using their services.

Moving forward

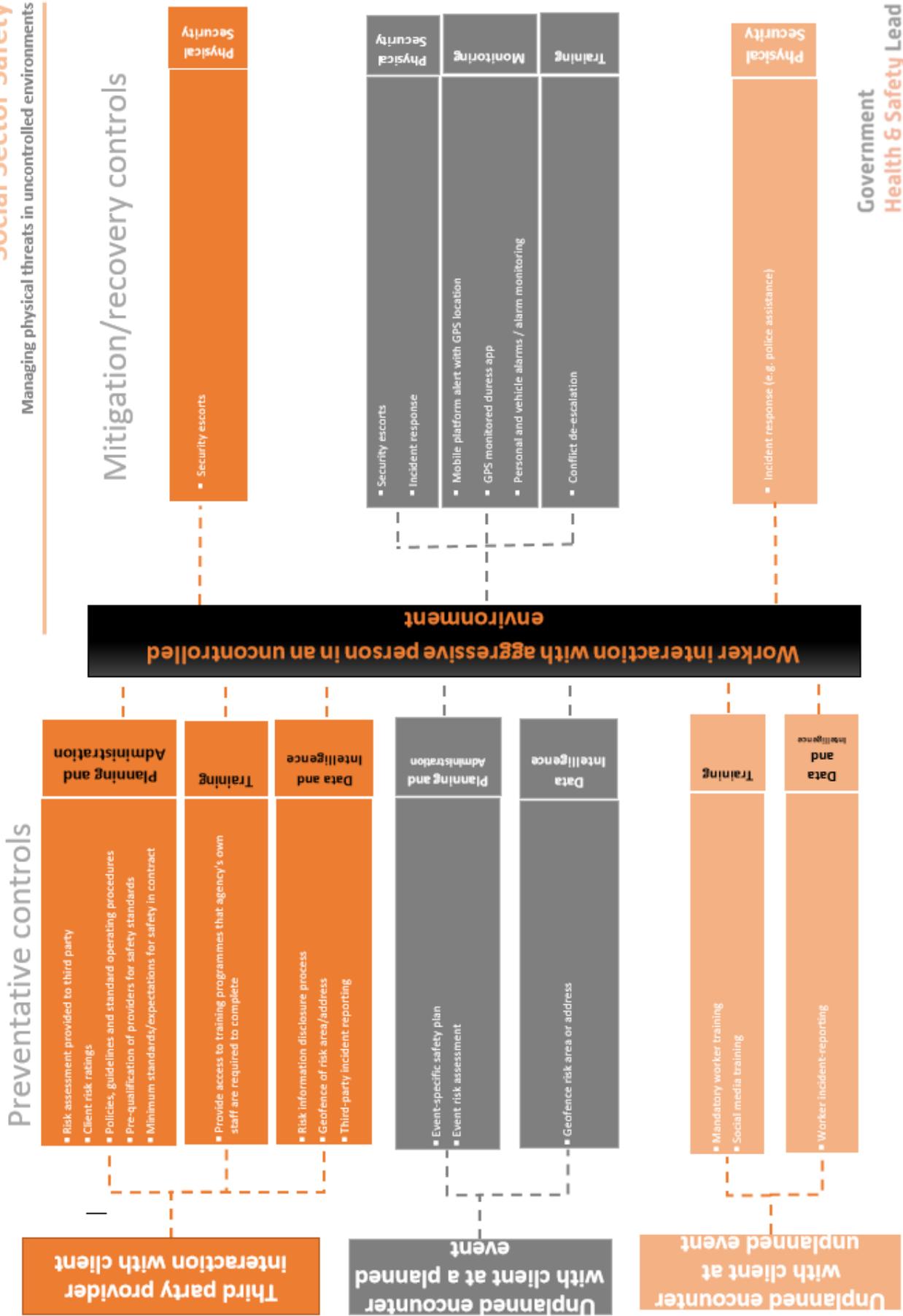
The Government Health and Safety Lead will facilitate a workshop with agency health and safety leaders to discuss these findings, and to progress work to support agencies with defining this risk and determining agreed sector thresholds for reporting.

Please direct any questions or feedback to ghsl@mpi.govt.nz

Appendix A

Social Sector Safety

Managing physical threats in uncontrolled environments



Social Sector Safety

Managing physical threats in uncontrolled environments

Preventative controls

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safe-work plans Client risk ratings Client meetings and location recorded (shared calendar) Policies, guidelines and standard operating procedures Risk Assessment Tool File review prior to meeting Designing client-centric systems to minimise client frustration Management of client expectations in advance (agency role and outcomes) Organisational standard/definition of threat and tolerance threshold Client complaint/feedback/experience register Sharing of information between government agencies Geofence risk area or address Tenancy information (properties and inhabitants) Formal record of previous experiences/interactions with client Review early threat indicators (record of low-grade aggressive interaction) Intelligence gathering (internal and external sources) Debriefing/post-incident learnings Drive-by/scope of location prior to meeting Standardised threshold for risk/threat tolerance Empathy training Induction training Effects of drugs/alcohol training Mental health training Respectful approach training Tactical communications training Situational awareness training Professional development Minimum training requirements Specialist advice, support and guidance for clients Independent client advocacy services to navigate government agencies Feedback loop for using government services 	<p>Planning and Administration</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client complaint/feedback/experience register Sharing of information between government agencies Geofence risk area or address Tenancy information (properties and inhabitants) Formal record of previous experiences/interactions with client Review early threat indicators (record of low-grade aggressive interaction) Intelligence gathering (internal and external sources) Debriefing/post-incident learnings Drive-by/scope of location prior to meeting Standardised threshold for risk/threat tolerance Empathy training Induction training Effects of drugs/alcohol training Mental health training Respectful approach training Tactical communications training Situational awareness training Professional development Minimum training requirements Specialist advice, support and guidance for clients Independent client advocacy services to navigate government agencies Feedback loop for using government services 	<p>Data and Intelligence</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empathy training Induction training Effects of drugs/alcohol training Mental health training Respectful approach training Tactical communications training Situational awareness training Professional development Minimum training requirements Specialist advice, support and guidance for clients Independent client advocacy services to navigate government agencies Feedback loop for using government services 	<p>Training</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist advice, support and guidance for clients Independent client advocacy services to navigate government agencies Feedback loop for using government services 	<p>Support</p>

Planned encounter with client in uncontrolled location

Worker interaction with aggressive person in an uncontrolled environment

Mitigation/recovery controls

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security escorts Buddy system Physical restraints 	<p>Physical Security</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobile platform with GPS location On-body camera GPS monitored duress app Personal and vehicle alarms / alarm monitoring Worker location; check in/out process Code word for requesting police assistance 	<p>Monitoring</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aggression / de-escalation training Break-away training Minimum training requirements 	<p>Training</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robust equipment that can withstand damage 	<p>PPE</p>

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Managing physical threats in controlled environments

Preventative controls

Encounter with clients at reception area

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reception training De-escalation training 	Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reception layout and design Protective glass Barriers 	Physical Environment

Client outside office at entry point

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restricted building access 	Physical Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security guards 	Physical Security

Client meeting/ interview in office meeting room

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> De-escalation training Interview room training and protocols 	Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-meeting screening/file review and risk assessment 	Planning and Adaptation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance of stakeholders/support people 	Support and Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restraints (Police/Corrections) 	Physical Security
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical distancing in meeting room 	Physical Environment

Mitigation/recovery controls

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple exits for staff Secure safe area (egress path/safe escape route) High desk/counter as barrier 	Physical Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duress alarm Security cameras 	Monitoring

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Controlled entry/intercom Lockdown remotes Restricted building access 	Physical Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security guards 	Physical Security
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety alarm CCTV 	Monitoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict de-escalation 	Training

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> De-escalation training Interview room training and protocols 	Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duress alarms CCTV 	Monitoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restraints (Police/Corrections) Security guard 	Physical Security
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary egress/ Safe office areas 	Physical Environment

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Worker interaction with aggressive person in a controlled environment

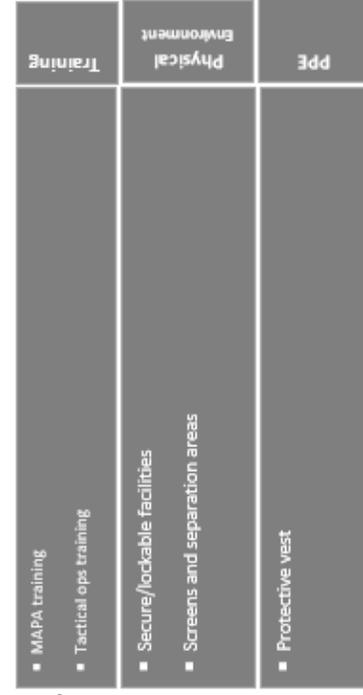
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Managing physical threats in controlled environments

Preventative controls



Worker interaction with aggressive person in a controlled environment

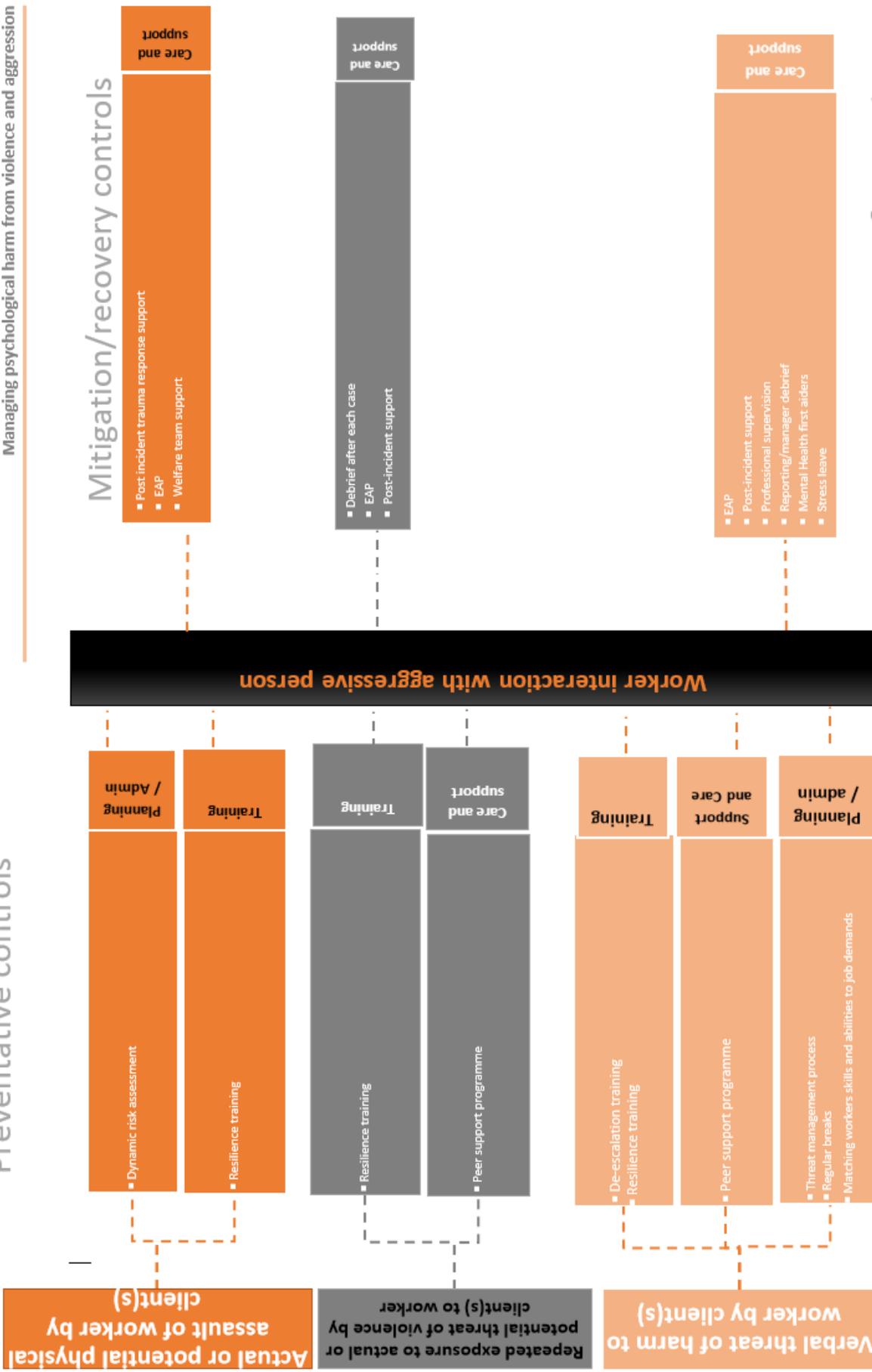


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Managing psychological harm from violence and aggression

Preventative controls



Mitigation/recovery controls

- Post-incident trauma response support
- EAP
- Welfare team support

Care and support

- Debrief after each case
- EAP
- Post-incident support

Care and support

- EAP
- Post-incident support
- Professional supervision
- Reporting/manager debrief
- Mental Health first aiders
- Stress leave

Care and support

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Worker interaction with aggressive person

Planning / Admin

Training

Training

Care and support

Training

Support and Care

Planning / Admin

Actual or potential physical assault of worker by client(s)

Repeated exposure to actual or potential threat of violence by client(s) to worker

Verbal threat of harm to worker by client(s)

Social Sector Safety

Managing psychological harm from violence and aggression

Preventative controls

Electronic communication to worker from client(s)

- De-escalation training
- Resilience training

Training

Death or harm to client

Exposure to violence against another person

- Training to emotionally distance
- Interview training

Training

- Selection criteria for certain roles

Planning / admin

Worker interaction with aggressive person

Mitigation/recovery controls

- Professional supervision

Care and support

- Incident reporting

Monitoring

- Post-incident trauma response support
- EAP
- Welfare team

Care and support

- Psychological support
- Wellness advisor support

Care and support

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