

Justice Department says violence in workplace underreported

By Amanda Pinto
Register Staff

As the circumstances surrounding Annie Le's death continue to unfold, the arrest of animal technician Raymond Clark III has highlighted the issue of violence on the job. It's an issue experts say is prevalent and "woefully underreported."

Le, a Yale graduate student, was conducting research on lab animals in Clark's care and their work brought them into contact with one another.

While more incidents of workplace violence are being reported, homicides at the hands of co-workers are still relatively rare.

Seventeen people are killed on the job each week in the United States, but only 8 percent of those crimes occur between co-workers or former co-workers, said Carrie Bulger, who teaches classes in industrial organizational psychology at Quinnipiac University.

Most of the killings stem from robberies, Bulger said, with much of the other non-lethal violence directed at employees who interact with the public in volatile settings, such as those who work for the Department of Children and Families. Violence between co-workers is far less common, she said.

"It's rare, and usually when it's between colleagues, it's because of something interpersonal — a conflict, something going on in the workplace," Bulger said.

New Haven Police Chief James Lewis has said little about Clark's alleged motive.

"It is important to note that this is not about urban crime, university crime, domestic crime, but an issue of workplace violence, which is becoming a growing concern around the country," Lewis said Thursday.

Terri Solomon, an attorney at Littler Mendelson, the country's largest law firm devoted exclusively to labor issues, said workplace violence is likely not increasing, but the reporting of that violence is.

The Department of Justice reports two million instances of workplace violence in the country annually — a wide definition that encompasses everything from profane yelling and threats to physical violence — and estimates that figure is under-reported by 50 percent, said Bo Mitchell, founder of Wilton-based emergency preparedness firm 911 Consulting.

Workplace violence is 18 times more likely in a business than is a fire, said Mitchell, whose firm has worked with 80 clients including the Stratford Department of Health and United Illuminating.

In most cases, Mitchell said, an employee who commits a violent act against a co-worker has displayed a variety of red flags prior to the incident.

"This is America and workplace violence is part of our culture. People don't have bad days and people don't snap. There are warning signs," Mitchell said.

In a message to the school community, Yale President Richard C. Levin said Clark, who had been a laboratory technician at Yale since 2004, never "gave any indication that his involvement in such a crime might be possible."

Experts acknowledged some cases of random violence cannot be predicted, but said that often after the fact, employees indicate a suspect in a violent crime was known to behave strangely.

They encourage employees to report those uncomfortable feelings.

Sometimes people dismiss a "crescendo of events" that could have drastic consequences, said Jonathan Best, president of Stratford-based crisis management firm Disaster by Design LLC. He encourages his clients to recognize potentially troublesome behavior in their co-workers.

"Aside from recognizing it, you need to address it, you can't just say 'that's just George,' or 'that's just Fred, he's always like that,'" Best said.

Mitchell said workplaces should have emergency action plans and observe and respond to warning signs like substance abuse, bullying behavior, depression, profanity and mood swings.

Solomon said people should also report people or co-workers who seem to give them menacing looks, or who send them angry or threatening e-mails.

A source said detectives are also investigating a testy e-mail Clark may have sent to Le over lab protocols she allegedly wasn't following.

Solomon said employees should also notify management if they have issued a protective order, and should refrain from holding doors open for employees who claim to have forgotten their access card or people who "look like they belong."

Best, whose clients include Yale Center for Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response and the University of New Haven, said workplaces should complete a hazard analysis and take appropriate steps.

"You cannot prevent every event from occurring, but what you can do is limit the likelihood, with locked doors, security systems, cameras, alarms," Best said.

The building in which Le was killed was equipped with scores of security cameras and required key-card access.

It is far easier for organizations to prevent violent offenders from the outside — by having security guards, separating workers from the public, and implementing other environmental controls — than it is to prevent a threat from within, Bulger said.

"In a case like this, it's so hard to predict when this is going to happen; its hard to say what an organization could have done," she said of the Yale case.

Amanda Pinto can be reached at apinto@nhregister.com or 789-5734.

