



# Liability & Property Pool Workers' Compensation Fund

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## **RISK CONTROL SOLUTIONS**

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A Service of the Michigan Municipal League Liability and Property Pool and  
the Michigan Municipal League Workers' Compensation Fund

### **INTERACTIONS WITH ANGRY CITIZENS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Occasionally, municipal employees will interact with citizens who are angry for some reason. These citizens may be:

- unhappy with a service provided by the municipality or one of its vendors – situations such as a snow plow knocking over a mailbox or water getting shut off;
- frustrated about “red tape” or bureaucratic processes;
- unaware of, or disagree with, rules, ordinances, or laws that the municipality is enforcing; or
- upset about political issues, real or perceived – sometimes issues that aren't even under municipal control, but fall under County, State or Federal jurisdiction.

Often these citizens will be very specific in telling you or your employees the reason for their anger. Welcome this! Knowing why someone is upset can help employees address the person's concern effectively and appropriately. If employees respond politely and professionally, listen with empathy, and offer solutions, the citizen's frustration can often be eased and the situation resolved.

The approaches recommended here may be helpful with angry employees as well. Circumstances such as disciplinary discussions or policy changes may upset employees, but management can often defuse such situations through calm, responsive interactions, and bring about more positive outcomes than might result if employees feel they are not being heard.

#### **THE PROBLEM**

Angry citizens create several concerns for public entity managers, supervisors, and employees.

Public agencies may lose credibility with their communities if these contacts are not handled well.

Encounters with angry citizens can create stress for employees, which may lead to increased illness, nervousness, and unhappiness. Stress may also lead to declines in attendance, accuracy, and productivity. Such consequences affect both employees and employers, but can be reduced or prevented if staff are provided with specific tools for interacting successfully with angry citizens.

Additionally, from a legal and risk management perspective, public agencies have an affirmative responsibility to provide employees with a safe workplace. Failing to do so may create both liability and MIOSHA enforcement concerns for employers.

#### **THE SOLUTION**

Management should establish basic guidelines that help employees identify and handle situations involving angry citizens. These guidelines should discuss how to address the immediate

circumstances while also building a foundation for better relations with the person in the future. Management should instruct employees on the extent of their authority to resolve citizen problems so that employees feel empowered to offer solutions within the designated boundaries.

Employees should receive training on these guidelines. They should know what the guidelines say, how to put them to use, and the potential consequences for both employees and the agency if they are not followed. Trainings should cover the following proven techniques.

### **Be Friendly Whenever Greeting Citizens**

Employees should always greet members of the public in a friendly manner. A warm welcome shows that the employee is kind, which makes it harder for people to be hostile toward them. Angry individuals often do not expect a friendly greeting. An employee's pleasant, courteous introduction can dramatically shift the direction of an entire exchange to a positive outcome because the person now views the employee as someone who will help them. Conversely, a curt or annoyed-sounding greeting can quickly ratchet the visitor's mood from "mildly upset" to "furious."

### **Maintain a Professional Demeanor**

Employees should act professionally, even when a citizen is expressing their frustration about a situation as anger directed at the front-line employee. While it is definitely difficult to be the focus of such emotions, the key is for the employee to remember that the citizen is upset at the situation, not them. A positive outcome is much more likely if the employee remains professional and polite. Looking the citizen in the eyes and speaking to them with respect can reduce their anger and help ease their perception of being treated unfairly or wrongly by the municipality.

Likewise, maintaining a pleasant, helpful demeanor and speaking with a neutral tone, low pitch, and moderate speed can help the person calm down. On the other hand, telling someone to 'calm down' frequently tends to make them angrier.

### **Project Empathy**

Projecting empathy – the ability to understand another person's situation and feelings – shows the angry citizen that the employee cares and their concerns are being heard. In many cases, all the person may want is someone to listen with compassion or simply pay attention to them. Even if an employee doesn't feel sympathetic toward the citizen, understanding the person's point of view is important to resolving the encounter.

Some non-verbal techniques for conveying empathy are tilting one's head attentively, maintaining eye contact while listening, taking notes, or using facial expressions that communicate sympathy.

### **Try Paraphrasing**

The most common verbal technique for expressing empathy is paraphrasing, which is restating in your own words what the other person just said. Employees can start a paraphrase by saying something like: "Tell me if I understand the situation correctly ..." or "So what you are saying is ..." By summarizing the citizen's complaint, the employee demonstrates that they have listened attentively and understand the individual's concern. Additionally, paraphrasing gently encourages the citizen to stop talking and listen to the employee, which can help defuse the situation by breaking the momentum of verbal and emotional escalation.

## Use Deflectors

Occasionally, an employee gets into an argument with an angry member of the public. Often this occurs because the employee reacted to things the person said that have nothing to do with their complaint. For example, the citizen may vent their feelings using insults and general negative comments about the employee or the department. If the employee responds in like manner, it will tend to feed the person's anger. To prevent this, employees should receive training in using deflectors.

A deflector is any technique that helps employees avoid the trap of responding to the citizen's anger – typically, it's a quick verbal transition that redirects the person's attention back to the business objective.

For example, if a citizen calls an employee a "jerk," the employee resists the natural impulse to reply with an insult or irritated tone of voice, and instead gives calm but firm verbal assurance and guidance: "I understand you are upset and I want to help, but I need us to be able to talk politely so we can resolve this situation. One possible solution would be ..." This also communicates that, while the employee is willing to be an ally, a minimum level of politeness is necessary on the citizen's part.

## Suggest a Solution

Management should instruct employees on the range of options available to them for addressing citizens' concerns. In many cases, staff can provide the individual with an appropriate solution. "I can help you fill out that paperwork right now, or you can take it home and bring it back Monday." In some cases, apologizing and making a commitment to correct the situation is sufficient. "I'm sorry we didn't process your paperwork. We can have it done for you by noon tomorrow."

If the person rejects these propositions, the employee should use the following procedure that takes a progressively firmer tone. It is very important for the employee to communicate sincerely and throughout this process that they want the best outcome for the citizen.

The first step is to ask the individual for their help. Many people respond favorably if the employee is polite and expresses a spirit of cooperation: "Please sir/ma'am, I'd like to work with you to solve this problem; will you please help?"

The employee should then explain a proposed solution, tailoring options to the individual based on the person's situation. The explanation should be specific about the steps involved and clear about what the person would gain by cooperating; people are more likely to agree if they understand the benefits to them. "Sir/ma'am, this solution is good for you and for us. I hope you can agree with it."

If the citizen remains reluctant, the employee can restate their desire to be helpful and give the person a chance to collaborate.

If the person makes an impossible request, the employee can explain, "Unfortunately, that doesn't work for us. What I'm proposing is the best option that will work for both of us."

If the citizen again refuses, explain again the benefit they would gain by agreeing to the proposal – and what they stand to lose by not agreeing. This should never be stated as a threat or punishment. Rather, it is simply that the proposed solution offers a benefit that other options don't. "Sir/ma'am, this is really the only win-win solution."

## **Always Remember That Safety Comes First!**

Management should encourage and train employees to successfully interact with difficult people. However, employers should also make sure employees understand they will not be able to satisfy every complainant or resolve every situation. Some individuals will be extremely determined to get what they want. Some may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffering a psychological condition, making it particularly difficult to reason with them. Whatever the circumstances, if an employee needs help, they should call for a manager.

In particular, employees should be instructed to take threats or overt signs of imminent violence seriously and call for help as soon as they occur. Employees should know that they are never expected to handle the situation alone when a citizen is threatening them with physical intimidation or violence. Employees should receive trainings on how to assess the potential for violence and how to contact managers and others for help. Contact methods established in advance can be a panic button placed in the areas where potential conflicts are most likely to occur, or code words that won't alarm the citizen but will alert nearby employees to summon assistance.

If management intervention does not satisfy the citizen or if the person poses an immediate threat, the manager should contact law enforcement officials immediately.

## **Documentation**

Any interaction that requires management intervention should be documented. The report should include the citizen's name and phone number, a description of the problem, the resolution, and whether the person made overt threats or law enforcement was called.

## **Physical Security**

Public agencies should periodically survey and evaluate their buildings and publicly accessible areas for physical security. Restricted or sensitive areas should be locked and not accessible from public areas. Barriers such as locked doors, high-top counters, and plexiglass windows limit the potential for physical contact and confrontation. Panic alarms, good lighting, and video cameras are also recommended employee safety enhancements.

## **SUMMARY**

It is important that municipal employees receive guidelines and training to successfully handle interactions with angry citizens. Municipalities should provide employees with tools to use in these encounters, including ways to maintain a friendly, professional demeanor when faced with emotional individuals, listen empathetically, use paraphrasing and deflectors, and offer solutions.

It is extremely important for employees to take threats, intimidation, or imminent violence seriously. They must learn how to assess the potential for violence and know how to call for help if a situation gets to the point where management or professional intervention is necessary.

In addition to the physical security and training topics discussed above, it would also be prudent for your municipality, no matter how large or small, to conduct active shooter training. Your local police or sheriff may already have produced such a program. Refresher training with employees should be done and all new employees should be informed of policy as well.

*As with all issues concerning public relations and employee safety, seek professional advice from your attorney and experts in the fields of customer relations and security. The absence of conflicts with citizens helps to create a safe and business-like atmosphere for all employees and results in better productivity. If you need additional information regarding this topic, contact the MML Risk Management or the League's Loss Control Services.*

**Important Phone Numbers**

MML Risk Management Services  
Loss Control Services

734.662.3246 or 800.653.2483  
800.482.0626

**Note:** This document is not intended to be legal advice. It does not identify all the issues surrounding the particular topic. Public agencies are encouraged to review their procedures with an expert or an attorney who is knowledgeable about the topic.

## Interacting with Angry Citizens Self-Assessment

Angry customers can create many concerns for employers and their employees. This assessment will help you determine how well prepared your organization is to handle situations involving angry customers.

### Does your organization:

1. Have an established procedure for dealing with angry customers?

Yes       No  →

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- The procedure should:***
- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
  - Establish that top management supports the process.
  - State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
  - Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
  - Establish methods for employees to get help.
  - Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.

2. Provide training to all employees?

Yes       No  →

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- The training program should:***
- Define and demonstrate clearly how to attempt to defuse citizens' anger.
  - Be mandatory for all employees who have contact with the public.
  - State that top management supports the process.
  - State that violations of the organization's policy may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
  - Establish methods for employees to get help.
  - Be clear that an employee can utilize safety procedures at any time necessary.
  - Be documented.
  - Provide practice using real life situations.

3. Require that management properly responds to employee successes and failures in dealing with angry customers?

Yes       No  →

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- A comprehensive program should:***
- Include proper training for employees.
  - Provide retraining where appropriate.
  - Include an effective corrective action program.

4. Have established safety procedures?

Yes       No  →

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- The procedure should:***
- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
  - Establish that top management supports the process.
  - State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge
  - Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
  - Establish methods for employees to get help.
  - Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.
  - Use your local law enforcement agency for assistance and advice

5. Have other measures in place to deal with angry citizens?

Yes  No  →

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***Do you:***

- Have a violence in the workplace policy?
- Assemble a threat assessment team if necessary?
- Assess areas where employees may be subject to threats or violence?
- Follow up to determine how well measures to protect your employees are working?
- Conduct “Active Shooter” training?

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## Conclusions

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If you were able to honestly answer “yes” to all five questions and your organization is following most or all of the suggested practices, then your organization has reduced its exposure to future liability claims and worker’s compensation claims. You should congratulate yourselves.



If you are unable to answer “yes” to any one or more of the five questions, your organization may have an exposure to claims from angry customers or from an employee resulting from an injury sustained during a confrontation with an angry customer. Missing components from one or more of the five recommended practices may also indicate a deficiency in your current program. You should take one or more of the following actions:

- **Correct any deficiency that may exist;**
- **Contact your attorney and a specialist in customer or public relations for advice;**
- **Contact the MML Risk Management Services at (800) 653-2483; or**
- **Contact Loss Control Services, at (800) 482-0626.**

**NOTE:** This document is not intended to be legal advice or implied to identify all exposures related to this issue. Public agencies are encouraged to contact their attorney for assistance in implementing these or other changes.