PURPOSE:
These guidelines discuss some basic concepts regarding the prevention of workplace violence. Most County employees will never be involved in an incident of workplace violence. However, due to the types of services that the County provides, and the violent nature of modern society, it is important to understand how to help prevent, prepare for, and respond to such incidents. These guidelines provide a starting point for such an understanding, but it may be necessary to consider specific training and preparedness needs for employees, and work with other supervisors and department management to fully address those needs.

1.0 EMPLOYEE CONDUCT

1.1 There can be times when a troubled employee becomes a troubling employee. This usually begins when a pattern of behavior escalates to the point where co-workers are afraid of an employee, or it can be a crisis that ultimately leads to a violent act. However, people rarely commit a violent act “out of the blue,” and people do not “just snap.”

1.2 A violent act is almost always preceded by a number of warning signs or changes in behavior. Since these changes can be subtle, it is important to observe behavior carefully. Some of these warning signs are listed below.

1.3 Use caution when reading this list – it is not intended as an evaluation tool to assess the stability of an employee, since a display of one or more of these signs does not necessarily mean that a person will become violent. This list is simply a summary of kinds of behaviors displayed by individuals who have at time committed violent acts. The purpose of this list is to heighten awareness and to help determine if there is a cause for concern. Consider these behaviors as a whole and don’t focus on one isolated act:
   (a) Blaming others; inability to accept responsibility. The employee may hold a grudge, especially against a supervisor or a co-worker who is alleged to have received some “favor” such as a promotion at the expense of the employee.
   (b) Paranoia – indicated by statements that everyone is against them or by panicking easily.
   (c) An increased propensity to push the limits of normal conduct, with disregard to the safety of self or co-workers.
   (d) Veiled or open threats of violence, e.g., predicting --- “bad things are going to happen,” especially threats that are detailed or appear to be well planned.
   (e) A history of discipline or litigation; reacting poorly to discipline or performance evaluations.
(f) Irritability, belligerence, hostility.
(g) Excessive focus on weapons, police, the military or violent crimes in the news.
(h) Changes in behavior, such as a deterioration of work performance or an increase in concentration problems; becoming inappropriately withdrawn, increasingly angry or agitated – or out of touch with reality.
(i) Reacting with great stress to workplace events such as job termination, layoffs, transfers, demotions, reorganizations, or labor disputes even if not directly involved.
(j) Unresolved/coping problems related to personal/family issues such as divorce, bankruptcy, child custody, or similar crisis.
(k) Depression – lethargy, refusal to communicate or respond to communication.
(l) Crossing a co-worker’s or supervisor’s physical boundaries (“getting in their face”), physical posturing or aggressiveness, stalking,
(m) Excessive phone calls and other abuse of time or employer resources.
(n) A known personal history of violent, reckless, or anti-social behavior.
(o) References to or identification with mass murders and infamous incidents of workplace violence. Having a fascination with recent incidents of workplace violence and expressing approval of the use of violence under similar circumstances.
(p) An obsessive involvement with the job, which becomes the sole source of personal identity and self-esteem.
(q) A “loner”, with little or no involvement with co-workers.

1.4 If a change in an employee’s behavior occurs that fits the overall pattern of this list, it is a cause for concern. It is important that supervisors communicate any concern immediately to higher management. There may be a need to involve County Counsel, Employee Relations, or Human Resources. Do not attempt to determine whether or not an employee is going to become violent based on behavior observed; leave this kind of assessment to the experts. At the same time, do not become complacent or delay notifying management if there is a credible concern.

1.5 Document all behaviors that contribute to credible concern. This includes comments made to the public, supervisory staff, or other employees, including threats – either written or verbal, or behaviors that seem either inappropriate or threatening.

1.6 The investigation may establish a reasonable cause to put the employee on administrative leave pending the initiation of discharge procedures. Consult with Human Resources, County Counsel, and Employee Relations before meeting with the employee to inform him or her of the management decision. The following steps may help to reduce the likelihood that the employee will resort to violent behavior:
   (a) Always treat the employee with respect and courtesy.
   (b) Inform the employee prior to the meeting of any right to representation or other rights.
   (c) Keep focus – do not be deflected by unrelated information or statements.
   (d) Do not negotiate with the employee after a final decision is made.
2.0 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

2.1 Whether domestic violence occurs at home or at the workplace, employees and their co-workers are affected. Increasingly, batterers are seeking out their domestic partners at the workplace because of their accessibility there. Signs that an employee is being battered include:

(a) Frequent injuries or injuries inconsistent with the stated cause.
(b) Frequent use of sick leave, absenteeism and tardiness
(c) Frequent “outside” telephone calls, usually in hushed tones.
(d) Decreased productivity, poor concentration, fatigue, depression, crying.
(e) Appearance and grooming deteriorate.
(f) Co-workers are asked by the victim to “cover” for employee. (avoidance of incoming calls, being on the lookout for somebody, trading breaks or other schedule modifications to avoid someone, or similar actions requested of co-workers)

2.2 Many victims of domestic violence are ashamed and embarrassed. Although rights to privacy must be respected, it is also a management responsibility to monitor employee work performance and workplace safety. If it is suspected that an employee is battered at home and employee work performance is affected:

(a) Discuss work performance problems with employee and review expectations.
(b) Provide information about the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

2.3 If department management learns that an employee is a victim of domestic violence, this information should result in a response:

(a) Review security measures, emergency procedures, and safety of employee.
(b) Contact higher management to discuss further action and the need for consultation with County Counsel and Employee Relations.
(c) Review, if appropriate, employees leave options (sick leave, leave without pay, administrative leave). Consult with County Counsel and/or Employee Relations.

3.0 “STALKERS”

3.1 “Any person who willfully, maliciously and repeatedly follows or harasses another person and who makes a credible threat with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear for his or her safety, or the safety of his or her immediate family, is guilty of the crime of stalking” (California Penal Code, sec. 646.9). Stalking goes beyond mere harassment in that threats of violence are involved. A stalker could be anyone -- an anonymous admirer, an ex-spouse or significant other, a neighbor, a co-worker, a client are examples of possible stalkers.

3.2 If an employee notifies management that he or she is the victim of a stalker, take the situation seriously. Do whatever that can reasonably be done to protect the victim from unwanted calls or contacts at work. Lives have been saved by a supervisor’s decisive action. Such actions might include:

(a) Calling the police at 9-1-1 (or 9+9-1-1) if the victim is in immediate danger.
(b) Moving the victim’s work assignment to another area.
(c) Taking any reasonable steps to reduce the stalker’s access to the victim.
(d) Obtaining a Temporary Restraining Order against the perpetrator. However, experience has shown that these Orders often do not prevent further stalking; instead, they can trigger a violation of the terms of the Order – or a violent act. Restraining Orders should therefore be used with extreme caution and only after thorough consultation with County Counsel.

4.0 PUBLIC SERVICE
Each department of the County should assess the risk of violence related to provision of public services and customer contact. Depending on the level of risk, specific procedures, policies, and training should be implemented to provide for the greatest possible degree of safety for employees. Examples of risk reduction include:
   a) Field contact procedures to reduce risk during site/client visits.
   b) Call-in procedure and communication capability. (Cell phone, pager, radio)
   c) Training in conflict resolution and /or verbal judo.
   d) Security training. (Duress alarms, personal security awareness, threat assessment)
   e) Periodic staff discussions of security issues and possible improvements in security.
   f) Prompt reporting and investigation of threats and incidents.

5.0 THE WORK ENVIRONMENT
5.1 The organizational culture may help to prevent confrontation by the consistent application of fair management practices and promoting mutual respect for all employees. Some negative aspects affecting the work environment are:
   (a) Employees anticipating a raise or promotion and are denied without explanation.
   (b) Failure of management to take appropriate disciplinary action.
   (c) Employees that are allowed to be shunned or ostracized by their peers.
   (d) Employees that operate without set limits for behavior or performance.
   (e) Setting of unrealistic standards and goals that are impossible to achieve.
   (f) Lack of communication and a strictly authoritarian management style.
   (g) Downsizing, layoffs, reorganizations that create instability and insecurity.

5.2 An organization does not have to be perfect to create a good working environment. Managers, supervisors, and staff create a professional environment through good behavior, open communication, and fair administration of policies.