

# Handling Verbal Violence at Work



## Introduction

- Civil servants may encounter verbal violence incidents such as being offended, vilified, cursed, bullied, insulted, provoked, threatened or intimidated by clients using abusive, obscene or offensive language while performing duties (e.g. providing counter services, answering clients' enquiries, meeting with clients, performing outdoor duties, etc.).
- These encounters may put civil servants under pressure or emotional distress. Such incidents could sometimes further develop into conflict situations. Verbal violence incidents could adversely affect the daily operation and service provision of government departments and staff morale.
- This leaflet briefly describes some possible measures for preventing and handling verbal violence at work.



# Understanding Verbal Violence

**Circumstances and factors which may be prone to inducing verbal violence include –**

- clients considering themselves or their relatives/friends being treated unfairly;
- clients disappointed with the services provided by the government departments or the replies from the government departments falling short of their expectation;
- clients projecting their previous grievances with the government departments onto the civil servants serving them;
- clients feeling that they are neglected/offended, or provoked by the attitude or behaviour of the individual civil servants;
- clients feeling helpless and indignant when facing a difficult situation and thus trying to take some action that may raise the attention of others;
- clients believing that they could get what they want if they keep pressurising the civil servants concerned; and
- the psychological or emotional state of the clients.

## Establishing an Effective Mechanism to Deal with Verbal Violence

**The mechanism to deal with verbal violence covers three aspects, namely prevention, handling procedures, and follow-up and review.**



## Prevention



### **Practicable measures to prevent verbal violence include –**

- provide appropriate support and formulate response measures through a structured safety management system;
- reduce the risk of civil servants encountering verbal violence through appropriate workplace design, provision of suitable facilities and regular review of work settings;
- regularly review work procedures to identify situations that are prone to inducing verbal violence and assess their potential risks/threats;
- review the modus operandi of service delivery and information dissemination to ensure that civil servants have a good grasp of the latest information and that their clients understand the relevant procedures and requirements;
- arrange training courses/seminars relating to the handling of verbal violence, such as those on customer service skills, handling complaints/conflicts, communication/mediation methods, emotional well-being, coping with adversity and work stress management, for civil servants with operational need; and
- brief civil servants on the procedures and contingency measures for handling verbal violence through various means, such as internal work guidelines, classroom training and simulation exercises.





## Handling Procedures

Government departments should conduct risk assessment in accordance with the actual working conditions of their civil servant staff, and put in place procedures and contingency measures for them for handling verbal violence incidents.

Good communication skills and attitude may alleviate clients' dissatisfaction and help prevent verbal violence incidents. In verbal violence situations, the civil servants involved should first calm the clients down, try to better understand their needs and work out appropriate solutions.



## Follow-up and Review

**In the context of follow-up and review, possible measures include –**

- establish a simple and effective reporting mechanism, and encourage civil servant staff to report verbal violence cases in a timely manner;
- conduct investigation as soon as possible on receipt of a report of verbal violence to find out the cause of the incident and, where necessary, improve the relevant work arrangements or implement other enhancement measures to prevent similar incidents from happening in future;
- provide timely assistance and emotional support to civil servant staff affected by verbal violence cases;
- arrange civil servant staff to share their experience, best practices and insights related to handling verbal violence at work through different channels (such as sharing sessions or staff newsletters). This will allow working personnel at different levels to have a better understanding of the actual work situation. It would also help civil servant staff relieve their work stress, promote and encourage mutual support among colleagues and foster team spirit; and
- organise staff commendation schemes and other motivation activities (such as annual outstanding staff awards) for meritorious civil servant staff to recognise their contributions.



**Affected civil servant staff may consider the following methods that could help relief stress arising from verbal violence -**

- stay positive and appreciate that clients may be dissatisfied with the government departments' policies, not necessarily their performance;
- acquire self-relaxation techniques (e.g. take a deep breath and practise muscle relaxation, participate in leisure activities or cultivate hobbies) to relieve stress caused by verbal violence;
- establish support network among colleagues;
- accept help from colleagues and render assistance to those in need; and
- talk to supervisors and colleagues when feeling emotionally disturbed and discuss with them possible solutions and improvement measures. If the problem persists, consideration should be given to seeking professional counselling and support services.





## Conclusion

- As the operational environment and the nature of services provided vary from one government department to another, individual government departments should devise their own mechanism for dealing with verbal violence that best suits their actual operational circumstances and requirements. At the same time, civil servant staff should get familiar with the guidelines and procedures for handling verbal violence, so as to effectively prevent and handle verbal violence incidents.
- For additional reference materials, please visit the website on Occupational Safety and Health in the Civil Service accessible at <https://www.csb.gov.hk/english/oshcs/index.html>.