

The Zero Tolerance Question¹

When it began appearing in the language three decades ago, the phrase “zero tolerance” customarily referred to a standard, rather than a penalty. Zero tolerance on drugs meant that the standard of conduct would be no drug use. Zero tolerance on harmful substances in food or water supplies meant that no amount of a particular toxic chemical or infectious agent would be considered safe.

Over the last decade, zero tolerance has taken on a different meaning: the application of an automatic penalty for a designated offense. In that sense the policy has at times been criticized for overriding judgment and common sense, as when school administrators acting under a zero tolerance drug or weapons policy expel a student for bringing a nail file to school or having a cold pill or a couple of aspirin tablets in a lunch box.

With regard to workplace violence, employers should make clear that zero tolerance in the original sense of the phrase applies—that is, no threatening or violent behavior is acceptable and no violent incident will be ignored. Company violence prevention policies should require action on all reports of violence, without exception. That does not mean, however, that a rigid, one-size-fits-all policy of automatic penalties is appropriate, effective or desirable. It may even be counterproductive, since employees may be more reluctant to report a fellow worker if he is subject to automatic termination regardless of the circumstances or seriousness of his offense.

Whether to use the phrase “zero tolerance” in its written workplace violence policy or find a different expression is a decision each employer will have to make. Whatever phrase is used, it should be made clear that the intent is to set a standard of conduct, not

¹ FBI/DOJ: Critical Incident Response Group. (2003). Workplace Violence: Issues in Response. Retrieved on July 9, 2024 from <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/workplace-violence-issues-response>

a system of penalties. Instead of warning of “automatic termination,” discipline policies should declare that violent workplace behavior will lead to penalties “up to and including termination.” That leaves room for managers to consider circumstances and exercise judgment on each case. It also properly puts the responsibility on management to ensure that penalties are not imposed arbitrarily, but are consistent, proportionate, and fair.