

The Issue

For the past decade, the health care field has experienced a sharp increase in workplace violence. Several factors have imposed significant stress on the entire health care system, and in some instances, patients, visitors and family members have attacked health care staff and jeopardized our workforce's ability to provide care. This rise in workplace violence has shown no indication of subsiding. Hospitals, health systems and providers support the enactment of a federal law that would protect health care workers from violence, just as current federal law protects airline and airport workers.

Background

Hospitals and health systems have long had robust protocols to detect, deter and respond to violence against their team members. However, violence against hospital employees continues to increase.

Day after day, the media reports on patients or family members assaulting hospital staff, sometimes with deadly consequences. For example, a Kentucky nurse was choked, thrown to the ground, and hit by a patient who later told police she was mad because "staff was taking too long to discharge her from the hospital."¹ Last year, a Florida physician sustained a concussion, brain contusion and two broken ribs after an alleged attack by a patient's relative.²

Data supports these news accounts. A Press Ganey survey found that on average, two nurses are assaulted every hour in the U.S., and a 2024 American College of Emergency Physicians survey found that 9 out of 10 respondents reported having been attacked or threatened in the past year.

Workplace violence has severe consequences for the entire health care system. Not only do these assaults cause physical and psychological injury for health care workers, but they make it more difficult for nurses, physicians and other clinical staff to provide quality patient care. Nurses and physicians cannot provide attentive care when they are afraid for their safety, distracted by disruptive patients and family members, or traumatized from prior violent interactions.

In addition, violent interactions at health care facilities tie up valuable resources and can delay urgently needed care for other patients. Studies show that workplace violence reduces patient satisfaction and employee productivity and increases the potential for adverse medical events.

¹ Mike Stunson, Patient chokes nurse because her discharge was taking too long, Kentucky cops say, Lexington Herald Leader (April 28, 2025)

² Mariah Taylor, Florida physician injured after alleged attack by patient's son, Becker's Hospital Review (Oct.16, 2024)
<https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/legal-regulatory-issues/florida-physician-injured-after-alleged-attack-by-patients-son/>

Despite the incidence of workplace violence and its harmful effects on our health care system, no federal law protects hospital workers from workplace assault. By contrast, Congress responded to increases in violent behavior on commercial aircraft and in airports by enacting a federal law criminalizing attacks against those employees. Vigorous enforcement of these federal laws helps to create a safer traveling environment, deters violent behavior and ensures that offenders are appropriately punished. Our nation's health care workers, who tirelessly treat patients while facing increased violence, deserve the same legal protections as airline workers. **Congress should enact the bipartisan Save Healthcare Workers Act (H.R. 3178/S. 1600), which provides protections similar to those in current law for flight crews, flight attendants and airport workers.**

The Save Healthcare Workers Act would make it a federal crime to knowingly assault a hospital worker on the job and establish fines, imprisonment, or both for these offenses. The legislation creates an affirmative defense if the assault results from the perpetrator's physical, mental or intellectual disability; in other words, if a patient, family member or visitor assaults a health care worker because of such a disability, that person could not be prosecuted.