

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

*When Community Concerns Become  
Workplace Challenges*

Terri Howard  
FEI Behavioral Health

December 2016

©2016 FEI Behavioral Health All Rights Reserved



**fei** workforce  
resilience

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

Civility in America is a cultural characteristic we often take for granted. It's taught at an early age, from kindergarten through college and into the job market. Respectful behavior leads to cooperation and understanding; it also leads to professionalism. Civil discourse and action is favored by employers and organizations. Many job postings highlight "collaborative" as a required skill for candidates.

In recent months, however, the concept of civility has begun to strain. Protest movements have erupted across the nation, from blocking the Dakota Access Pipeline to marching in opposition of President-elect Donald Trump. While many are peaceful and protected by the First Amendment, others have spiraled into destructive behavior and violence.

*What can an organization do when facing the risk of civil unrest both within and outside its walls?*

The workplace, too, has seen rising tensions fueled in part by a highly combative presidential campaign cycle. Political, social and cultural issues—from Black Lives to Blue Lives; from gender equality to "bathroom bills"—are topics of regular conversation and debate. It can be difficult for employees to leave their personal concerns at home, especially if they or a loved one are actively involved in civic controversies.

What can an organization do when facing the risk of civil unrest both within and outside its walls? We guide you through examples of civil disruption in the workplace, the implications of community turmoil on business continuity and how you as an employer can work to disarm conflict while maintaining the safety of your employees and their dependents.

### Civil Unrest and Disruption Today

Merriam-Webster defines civil disobedience as the "refusal to obey laws as a way of forcing the government to do or change something." Civil unrest, then, can be understood as the means by which disobedience is carried out—street protests, picketing, rioting, etc. It is this concept of unrest and disruption that impacts communities and business continuity.



Two real-world examples in 2016 include protests and riots in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during August and Portland, Oregon during November. The first, in Milwaukee, were triggered by the officer-involved shooting of Sylville Smith. Racial tensions have been growing across the U.S. since the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida by a neighborhood watch volunteer and subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. While the protest in Milwaukee began peacefully, the scene soon became violent and a number of businesses were either damaged or destroyed during the night's rioting.

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

The second incident, in Portland, came after President-elect Donald Trump beat Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in what is considered one of the most divisive election campaigns in recent history. Distraught over the potential outcomes of a Trump administration, protestors took to the streets of downtown Portland and, again, began peacefully enough until events turned violent. In the end, property and business damages were estimated to cost over \$1 million and more than 100 people were arrested. <sup>1</sup>

*It can be easy to think of civil unrest and community issues as “apart” from your business concerns, but the two are very interconnected.*

In both situations—only two of many accounts of recent unrest—businesses were caught in the crossfire between the community and social unease, finding themselves collateral damage in a larger conflict. It can be easy to think of civil unrest and community issues as “apart” from your business concerns, but the two are very much interconnected.

How might civil unrest spill over into the workplace? Let’s begin with a few illustrative scenarios:



**Scenario #1:** On casual Friday at the office before the 2016 general election, an employee comes into work wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat. He removes the hat during operating hours and sets it prominently on the edge of his desk. A co-worker sees it and, feeling uncomfortable, comes to you asking that Trump-related material be removed due to campaign rhetoric. How do you respond?



**Scenario #2:** An employee who has been considered male meets with you to explain that she gender-identifies as female. She had been openly encouraging ongoing legislation for gender-neutral bathrooms, but was later confronted by a couple of co-workers who said they’d never support legislation and would monitor the bathrooms should such laws pass. The employee is now too scared to “come out” as female and asks you for guidance. What do you tell her?



**Scenario #3:** While drinking morning coffee from a mug adorned with the Washington Redskins logo, an employee is approached by a new hire and told she is a racist for endorsing the Redskins. She responds by stating she isn’t racist and that the new hire is on thin ice for making such comments to someone they barely know. As the manager of the new hire, how do you handle your co-worker’s complaint that your direct report called her racist? How do you address the new hire’s feelings that the Redskins’ logo is inappropriate?

<sup>1</sup> 2016. Portland wakes up to damage from anti-Trump riot. *The Oregonian/OregonLive*. Retrieved from [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2016/11/pearl\\_district\\_ne\\_portland\\_wak.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2016/11/pearl_district_ne_portland_wak.html)

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

### Your Organization and the Community

#### At Work

Let's consider this example: Quinn, one of the payroll staff in finance, has a spouse who works on the police force. Taylor, a member of the sales team, has a sibling who is a social justice activist. Recently, there was a demonstration at city hall protesting legislation viewed as discriminatory toward minority groups. The police were brought in for crowd control. While the demonstration was largely benign, a heated exchange between a policeperson and a protester erupted. The argument quickly escalated and some of the protesters soon began hurling objects at the police force.



A number of protesters were arrested and jailed overnight, including Taylor's sibling. The next day, Taylor runs into Quinn and makes disparaging remarks about Quinn's spouse. Quinn explains that his spouse wasn't even present at the demonstration; the officer was on patrol elsewhere. Regardless, Taylor continues making negative, generalized comments about the police and both Taylor and Quinn begin shouting at one another. The chief financial officer happens to walk by and reprimands both employees. The issue is then referred to HR for further action.

Commenting on a co-worker's political preferences is one matter, but when family and friends become involved in situations where social conflict and the chance of physical altercation is high, the emotional stress can affect employees' collaboration, relationships and productivity.

#### In the Community

In addition to emotional and relational impact, issues in the community also can pose a financial risk to organizations. In extreme circumstances, businesses have been damaged to the point where operations are interrupted or brought to a standstill. A U.S. government survey conducted after the Freddie Grey Baltimore riots of 2015 estimated \$9 million in damages, encompassing almost 300 businesses and a number of homes. <sup>2</sup> Those riots also resulted in a 10 p.m. curfew, forcing businesses to close earlier than was typical and interrupting previously normal operations.

*Your business does not operate in a bubble; rather, it is part of a larger community ecosystem.*

<sup>2</sup> 2015. The Baltimore riots caused \$9 million worth of damage. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-baltimore-rioting-damage-estimate-at-9-million-us-government-2015-5>

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

Small businesses are at an increased risk. During the Ferguson riots of 2014, small business owners reported losses ranging from damaged property to stolen inventory. Others faced reduced hours or staff shortages in the wake of community unrest and requests from local law enforcement.<sup>3</sup> Such strains on a small business, including loans to cover costs and higher insurance premiums in the wake of rioting, can sometimes mean the end of operations.

The eventual cost of civil unrest on businesses—damages, insurance costs, lost time, disrupted operations—ranges by business and by location. Yet, it is clearly substantial to an organization's bottom line and warrants serious thought when considering the relationship between your organization and the surrounding community. Your business does not operate in a bubble; rather, it is part of a larger community ecosystem.

### Managing a Civil Workplace

What can you do in your organization to help manage conflict presented by civil disruption in the community or in reaction to nationwide events? While employees have the right to express themselves, doing so in the workplace requires careful consideration of the environment, employer expectations and the attitudes of co-workers. Businesses are responsible for navigating these issues in an appropriate, yet respectful, way.

There are a number of steps your organization can take to ensure employee concerns are acknowledged without devolving into open conflict or internal disruption, including:

**Setting the tone for appropriate workplace behavior.** Professionalism is paramount in most workplaces, fortified by respect for others. Those in management positions can set the bar for how employees are expected to act by modeling respectful behaviors toward co-workers, peers and customers. Again, while it is an employee's right to voice opinions on political, social or cultural issues, doing so in a diplomatic and non-confrontational way is key.

**Creating and encouraging a diverse and inclusive work culture.** Building a workforce with a diverse voice—be it culturally, religiously, racially or gender-based—can create a stronger sense of tolerance and acceptance among your employee population. Diversity leads to a better understanding not only of the world at large, but also of the people and cultures present in the surrounding community. Establishing inclusiveness as a core value of the organization helps normalize diversity and puts human faces to potentially faceless, abstract ideas.

**Establishing policy and process for conflict resolution.** Healthy conflict resolution policies and processes, including anti-bullying measures, will create a sense of safety in the workplace should employees feel the need to report an incident. Not only that, but a diverse structure of managers, department heads and human resource representatives invests the whole organization in the process of ensuring conflicts are handled appropriately. Most organizations have conflict resolution protocols already in place, but now may be the time to re-evaluate and ensure that the process is confidential, transparent and inclusive.

<sup>3</sup> 2014. Silent victims: Ferguson business owners say riots, looting ruining their livelihoods. *The Washington Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/18/ferguson-businesses-struggle-amid-looting-violence/>

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

### **Adhere to the regulatory language of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) employer responsibilities.**

According to OSHA, its "mission is to assure safe and healthful workplaces by setting and enforcing standards, and by providing training, outreach, education and assistance. Employers must comply with all applicable OSHA standards."<sup>4</sup> These guidelines assure organizations offer safe workplaces for all employees, including during times of community unrest. Familiarity with OSHA's expectations and standards will help employers plan in accordance with their responsibility to employee health and well-being.

Furthermore, partnering with a third-party vendor to develop programmatic contingencies and support services will assist in mitigating the kinds of outcomes faced by those organizations in Ferguson, Baltimore and Portland. Some worth considering are:

- **Workplace violence prevention training.** Violence prevention, and especially training that uses a trauma-informed approach (taking one's past experiences and trauma into account), serves as a procedurally sound de-escalation practice to maintain a safe, civil workplace environment. This type of training will not only build healthy relationships among staff, but also provides a foundational approach should workplace conflicts turn physical or violent.
- **Crisis planning.** Having a plan in place for any type of crisis scenario is a great idea, and your organization might already have one. A crisis plan allows you to address a variety of factors during chaotic situations, including accounting for people, coordination via call center and on-site services, data management, and public-facing communications and media relations. In terms of civil and community unrest, consider coordinating with local first responders and fellow businesses to determine the best course of action during crises such as riots. Regular evaluation of the plan is critical.
- **Offering an employee assistance program (EAP).** An EAP serves as a benefit to employees and their dependents who are feeling particularly stressed or overwhelmed, either due to workplace concerns or the strain of civil conflict in their personal lives. A confidential service, the EAP connects callers to a counseling professional who will address their immediate needs and, if necessary, offer a referral to sessions with a counselor near their work or home.
- **Organizational development.** The EAP can also consult on numerous workplace issues while assisting with a full organizational assessment of policies and procedures, ensuring your company is doing its best to offer a welcoming, safe and inclusive work environment to all employees. Additional trainings, such as those on diversity, workplace bullying and emotional intelligence, can prepare your workforce for the many differences in opinion it will encounter both at work and in the larger community.

<sup>4</sup> OSHA Laws & Regulations. United States Department of Labor: Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.osha.gov/law-regs.html>

# Civil Unrest and Employees:

## *When Community Concerns Become Workplace Challenges*

### The FEI Difference

Having a partner with a wealth of experience in workforce resilience services is more critical now than ever before. FEI provided the first national EAP network over 35 years ago, and is the leading force in the fields of crisis management and employee assistance. Our wealth of expertise guarantees your organization and its people are supported during any situation, scalable from small business culture to multi-property corporations.

FEI's EAP allows for employees concerned about community issues and other civil disruptions to reach professional counselors in a confidential way. We also offer organizational development, trainings and, in partnership with The Mandt System®, a trauma-informed workplace violence prevention program. These resources—along with EAP and crisis management—address the full spectrum of business solutions for your entire workforce.

By partnering with FEI to build a multifaceted and holistic resilience solution, your organization can expect to have:

- 24/7 access to master's-level clinicians for employees and their dependents.
- A dedicated account manager who will partner with your business on a range of organizational challenges and opportunities, including civil disruption in the workplace.
- Evaluation of organizational policies and procedures to ensure appropriate conflict resolution practices and inclusivity.
- Comprehensive organizational risk assessments.
- Best practice plans for supporting employees during a crisis (such as riot).
- A crisis communication plan for internal and external stakeholders.
- An emergency call center as an additional crisis response resource to immediately respond to employee and family inquiries in the event of a crisis situation.
- The ability to account for your staff's location, status and needs throughout a crisis.
- Tools to collect, sort and maintain information through the use of FEI's exclusive web-based information system.

As a leader in preparedness, response and recovery associated with the human dimensions of workplace resiliency, FEI integrates a unique perspective on behavioral health support through the framework of crisis management experience and an understanding of workforce well-being. We are the only organization capable of assisting employers and their employees with life's daily challenges and unexpected critical incidents.

Don't allow civil unrest to disrupt your workplace or your community—partner with FEI today.

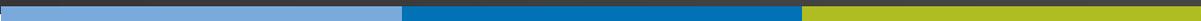




# fe*i* workforce resilience



*FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.*



phone: 800.987.4368  
fax: 414.359.1074

Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
New York, New York  
Atlanta, Georgia

website: [www.feinet.com](http://www.feinet.com)  
email: [info@feinet.com](mailto:info@feinet.com)

