

Securing Your Office

BY MARSHAL S. WILLOCK

The sad reality of a domestic relations case is that it is highly stressful for even normally well-adjusted people. For those already erratic, unstable, or predisposed to violence or a personality disorder, involvement in family law disputes can trigger outbursts, assaults, and other criminal behavior. Most courthouse and lawyer shootings have emanated from family law cases.

In 2006, a litigant in Reno, Nevada, murdered his wife and then used a rifle from a nearby parking garage to shoot the judge presiding over the case as he stood in his chambers. The shooter was caught, convicted of murder and attempted murder, and is now serving a life sentence. The incident led courts and law offices to take a serious look at their security.

Anyone designing, or retrofitting, a law office should keep issues of security well in mind at all phases of design and construction. Security should be multi-layered. Office windows should be placed so that there is no vantage point from which anyone outside can have a direct line of sight to those working inside. If that is unavoidable, then curtains, blinds, coatings, and furniture placement should minimize exposure.

Whenever possible, parking areas should be gated, well lit, and observed. Cameras should provide a complete view of the parking lot on a monitor at the secured lot building exit, and the video feed should go to constant-loop seven-day-memory security recordings. Ideally, cameras should cover every building entrance, any access corridors, and all lobbies. A panic button should be set to dial the police at the secured-lot exit, at reception, and anywhere else rapid response might be needed.

Secure inner offices

The reception lobby should be separated from the inner workspaces, and no one should access inner offices without being admitted. Clients with appointments should be welcomed upon arrival and, if appropriate, escorted in. All entrances to the work spaces from the lobby should be secured by doors that close and lock automatically and require card or fob reading to open. Building entrances should lock automatically after business hours; a call-button should be used for after-hours and weekends.

If counsel comes to believe that the opposing party is a threat, protection of staff takes priority over the convenience of litigation. Mediation and other meetings should occur at the courthouse (most courts will make space—inside the security perimeter—upon request). If someone has demonstrated the potential or actuality of being a problem, use your state's "trespass" statute to bar him or her permanently from your facilities; this will facilitate

arrest should they arrive uninvited. Consider restricting communications to written documents only.

Whenever opposing parties or counsel are present, malpractice insurance companies suggest making sure files and other documents are not left anywhere they can be directly observed or touched; never leave an opposing party unattended in your office. Opposing parties, their counsel, or guests should be escorted to the break room or out to the public corridor for restroom breaks. Access to copiers or any other machinery should be limited to your own staff.

Electronic security is an entirely different level of security, and many older practitioners have not given it serious consideration. Any office that provides Wi-Fi access must ensure that the maximum level of available encryption for access to your data network is the minimum standard for allowing anyone to use the portal. Better still is to make sure that there is no wireless access to the firm server at all.

Establish chain of command

Every office should have a policy that addresses who is responsible for doing what in an emergency. Finally, with an eye toward the line attributed to John Steinbeck: "When seconds count, the cops are just minutes away," a frank discussion should be undertaken about the pros and cons of arming personnel and, if so, who. If the decision is made to allow guns in the office, rapid-opening gun safes should be supplied and secured, and training in firearm use should be obtained. In Nevada, group classes are offered for those seeking "concealed carry" permits.

Ultimately, security measures and safety are matters of personal responsibility. Staff members should be alert to their surroundings at all times and instructed to communicate immediately with a designated manager about any potentially threatening person or situation. Although the best security system may not protect everyone at all times, the odds of preventing or dealing with a security breach can be greatly enhanced by having law office safety features and smart emergency procedures in place before a tragedy threatens. **FA**



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