

Empower workplace to report bullies: Koster

By AdvocateDaily.com Staff

Long-term care facilities that want to reduce workplace bullying must empower bystanders to report bad behaviour, says Toronto workplace violence and elder abuse consultant [Denise Koster](#).

“It’s not about changing bullies,” says Koster, principal of [Koster Consulting Associates](#). “Bystanders have to step up and align themselves with each other to stop those who are bullying their co-workers as well as residents.”

If teams of co-workers know they have each other’s backs, the fear of retaliation is minimized, and reporting is likely to increase, she tells AdvocateDaily.com.

“It’s about creating an environment where people’s moral compass is dialed-up high,” she says, adding it has the effect of improving staff morale along with the experience of residents in care.

“Every action the staff take can make or break the day of the residents,” Koster says.

Most long-term care facilities have some form of mandated in-service training for staff about resident abuse and neglect, she says. The training sessions inform workers of the duty to report unacceptable behaviour toward residents by other staff, but often does not cover staff-to-staff interactions.

Over the course of her career, Koster says she has noticed during her investigations that in at least half of cases of alleged resident abuse, the abuser is also a workplace bully.

Through the course of conducting interviews, she says she often discovers that although people witness abuse or neglect — and know they can be charged with neglect by leaving a resident in harm’s way — the fear of being bullied by the abuser can hold them back from reporting.

“What happens is staff will witness neglect or abuse, and in their mind, they’ll say, ‘I know I have to report it,’ but they worry, ‘If the bully finds out, they will come after me. And if not, then their gang will come after me,’” Koster says.

Even when abuse has been substantiated, the abuser may not lose their job because of union protection or other reasons, she adds, which could further prevent a co-worker from reporting.

“So the person who reported, with goodwill intent, and as mandated to do so, now has to deal with the wrath of that person coming back,” Koster says. “The whole issue of retaliation is huge.”

Her advice to long-term care facilities that want to address bullying is to get their house in order first — and the best way to do that is by empowering workers to stand together to report unacceptable behaviour.

In the Elizabeth Wettlaufer inquiry, which examined the eight killings by a former registered nurse in Ontario, people described her as pleasant, and always having a smile.

“But she killed residents,” Koster says. “People knew she had exhibited bad behaviours and that there was a potential addiction as well as other mental health issues.

“In these situations, people have willful blindness — they become afraid of that individual and say, ‘It’s not my issue.’”

The reality is when someone is reported to have committed resident abuse, it’s likely not the first time, she says.

“Often, new staff are the ones who report,” Koster says, because longer-term employees may have become jaded by the “low bar” of professionalism accepted in some workplaces.

“Ultimately, that’s going to affect who is receiving care,” she says. “If that person is nasty to everyone they work with, you can imagine how they likely treat residents.”