



Resource Type: **Workplace Tool**
Primary Audience: **Employers**

Navigating the DVSAS Workplace Policy Guidance – A Toolkit for Small Businesses

This toolkit is designed to accompany the Workplaces Respond [How to Develop a DVSAS Workplace Policy Guide](#) and translate it into practical, operational steps for small businesses — generally defined as having 20 employees or less.¹ The model policy guide begins with key definitions related to domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking (DVSAS), followed by guidance on integrating a DVSAS policy into workplace systems and aligning it with federal, state, and local legal requirements, including resources on employee rights across jurisdictions. It also outlines core policy elements, provides sample policy language, and offers key considerations for employers adapting the policy to their specific workplace context.

Building on this structure, this toolkit focuses on how those policy expectations can be translated into practical, operational approaches for small businesses with limited staffing, shift-based operations, and customer-facing roles where decisions often need to be made quickly and in real time.

It provides practical strategies for strengthening workplace safety, implementing accommodations, managing staffing needs, establishing clear reporting practices, and leveraging external resources to support employees and build workplace capacity.

¹ Under federal law, “small business” or “small organization” generally refers to an independently owned and operated entity that is not dominant in its field; size may also be based on employees, revenue, or other factors. Employers with ≥1 employee must pay federal taxes, provide a safe workplace, comply with minimum wage laws, report serious injuries to OSHA, and prohibit pay discrimination based on gender. Other federal laws apply only if the employer meets certain size thresholds: for example, Fair Labor Standards Act (all employers), Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (≥15 employees), Family and Medical Leave Act (≥50 employees). For more information, visit: <https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/legal-compliance/Federal-Labor-Laws-by-Number-of-Employees.pdf>

Balancing workplace expectations and safety

In many small businesses, expectations around behavior are shaped less by written procedures and more by routine workplace habits and practices. For example, employees in client-facing roles are often expected to remain polite and composed even when customer behavior becomes uncomfortable, disruptive, or threatening.²

Since many small businesses do not rely on formalized systems, responses to safety concerns can vary depending on context and individual judgment.³ This lack of formality can lead to inconsistency in how hostile behavior from co-workers, customers, or other individuals in the workplace is identified and addressed.

Service expectations cannot take priority over employee safety. Employees should never feel obligated to remain in an interaction or continue service when they feel unsafe or at risk.

Strategies for small businesses to increase safety in the workplace include:

- Training for employees to disengage from hostile or unsafe interactions without needing prior approval from their supervisor.
- Guidance to supervisors and managers that staff decisions related to individual safety are reinforced and supported when potentially threatening situations unfold.
- Explicit communication from business owners and managers that service speed, customer satisfaction, tips, or productivity targets does not come at the cost of employee safety.

Making safety accommodations work in small, shift-based operations

In workplaces with limited staff coverage and fast-paced operations, safety concerns related to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or harassment can quickly affect communication, scheduling, employee interactions, and the ability to carry out daily work responsibilities. Safety accommodations are especially important in small, shift-based

² Grandey, A. A. (2003). When “the show must go on”: Surface acting and deep acting as determinants of emotional exhaustion and peer-rated service delivery. *Academy of management Journal*, 46(1), 86-96.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30040678>

³ Bruening RA et al. (2015). How to engage small retail businesses in workplace violence prevention: perspectives from small businesses and influential organizations. 58(6).
<https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/201111>

operations because employees often work in environments where schedules, staffing, customer interactions, and daily responsibilities are closely connected.

In these settings, timely workplace adjustments can help reduce risk, support employee well-being, and maintain continuity of operations during situations involving domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or harassment. Safety accommodations are most effective when they are incorporated into everyday workplace routines and can be acted on quickly through existing communication channels.

Accommodations may vary depending on whether the person causing harm is a co-worker, customer, or another third party connected to the workplace.

When the person causing harm is a co-worker:

- Adjust schedules, opening/closing shifts, or break times to reduce direct overlap between employees.
- Reassign job duties or workflow responsibilities to limit interaction during shifts.
- Identify alternate supervisors or points of contact if reporting structures contribute to safety concerns.

When the person causing harm is a customer or client:

- Reassign a staff member from customer-facing responsibilities to back-of-house, inventory, or administrative tasks.
- Adjust service assignments or coverage areas to reduce contact with a specific individual.
- Coordinate with supervisors or designated staff to respond to concerning on-site behavior.

When the person causing harm is a third party external to the workplace (such as a current or former partner):

- Coordinate safe arrival and departure procedures during opening or closing shifts.
- Allow employees to pause or stop responding to calls, messages, or online inquiries during work hours when a person causing harm is using employer-provided communication channels.
- Share limited, need-to-know safety information with designated supervisors or shift leads to support workplace safety.

Managing staff absences in short-staffed settings

Employees may need time away from work for safety-related reasons linked to domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, or harassment, sometimes without advance notice. These needs can arise quickly and take different forms depending on the situation. For example, an employee may need to relocate or temporarily stay in a safer location to reduce immediate risk and protect themselves or their family. They may need to manage unwanted contact, threats, or other urgent safety concerns. In other cases, they may need to attend court hearings or seek protection orders, which often must be completed during standard working hours.

Employees may also need time to meet with advocacy, legal, or support services, or to access urgent medical, counseling, or safety planning support. These situations are often time-sensitive and may require leaving work quickly or adjusting schedules on short notice. Employers should understand that safety-related absences may happen suddenly and without advance notice and ensure that such unexpected absences are not held against employees.

For small businesses with a limited number of employees, the challenge is not just approving leave but maintaining adequate staffing to continue business operations.

Practical approaches include:

- Cross-training staff so different roles (cashier, server, receptionist) can be covered by multiple employees.
- Use shift swapping as a primary coverage strategy before relying on denial or delay.
- Allow managers or owners to step into customer-facing roles when necessary.

Keeping Reporting Clear in Informal Communication Systems

Small businesses often rely on informal communication, such as text messages, phone calls, or conversations during shift changes, to respond quickly to workplace issues. These communication methods are fast and practical, but they can also make it harder to ensure consistency in how information is understood and acted on.

Clear reporting and documentation practices help ensure that concerns are received, recognized, and followed up in a timely way, even when they are shared through more informal channels.

Strategies for building consistent reporting and communication practices:

- Assign a specific person on each shift or at each location who staff can contact about safety concerns.
- Identify a different contact when the concern involves a direct supervisor or business owner.
- Avoid discussing employee safety concerns in open work areas, group chats, shift-change conversations, or shared scheduling systems.
- Use a consistent method for documenting workplace safety concerns, such as an incident form or password-protected file.
- Keep emergency contact and shift coverage procedures updated and prominently displayed so businesses can respond without relying on informal last-minute coordination.

Using External Support Systems to Extend Capacity

Small businesses are not expected to provide long-term case management or legal advocacy for employees experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, or harassment. Their role is to support workplace safety, respond to workplace impacts, and connect employees to appropriate outside services when needed. Local domestic violence and sexual assault organizations can provide specialized support such as safety planning, emergency housing or relocation, transportation assistance, counseling, and legal advocacy. Establishing strong relationships with local service providers allows small businesses to focus on immediate workplace adjustments and safety responses.

National organizations can also help small businesses strengthen their own workplace response capacity. Technical assistance providers can support small businesses in developing workplace policies, strengthening supervisors' capacity to respond to workplace violence and harassment, and adopting trauma-informed approaches to support affected employees.

In practice, small businesses can:

- Provide referrals when employees experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking or harassment need additional safety planning or support.
- Encourage employees to use outside resources while internal adjustments are made (schedule changes, contact restrictions).

- Maintain an accessible and prominently displayed list of local [domestic violence](#) and [sexual assault](#) advocacy organizations.
- Reach out to no-cost technical assistance providers like the [Workplaces Respond National Resource Center](#), to strengthen internal capacity.