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OPINION

Every 36 seconds a health care worker is assaulted

Massachusetts lawmakers should pass bipartisan workplace violence reforms before the legislative session ends.

By Cari Medina, Katie Murphy, and Steve Walsh Updated June 30, 2026, 3:00 a.m.



Nearly 7 out of 10 nurses now report experiencing an assault in the workplace. PASCAL FOSSIER/ADOBE

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Every 36 minutes someone working at a Massachusetts hospital is subject to a verbal threat, physical assault, or other form of abuse. Workplace violence has become an unacceptable — and all too familiar — part of their daily work, and [it is driving many to leave the field](#). Now, with just weeks left in the legislative session, state lawmakers should [pass reforms that would help](#) protect health care workers.

The workplace violence crisis has grown in prominence since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Health care facilities are emotionally charged settings by nature, but tensions among patients and visitors have escalated in recent years due to a range of pressures, from COVID-related safety restrictions to the long wait times that many are now experiencing.

Every 36 minutes, according to incident data collected from Massachusetts hospitals, that tension goes too far. Nearly 7 out of 10 nurses [now report having experienced an assault in the workplace](#). One community hospital nurse was struck so hard that her bicep was torn, requiring months of physical therapy to heal. Another [was smashed in the head by a fire extinguisher](#) in 2021. For the central Massachusetts registered nurse shoved over the bars of a stretcher in 2017, it meant a six-month recovery from rotator cuff surgery.

These stories are not unique. They extend to nearly every member of a patient's care team, from security personnel to intake staff and care attendants. As damaging as the physical toll can be, the psychological damage is often even more devastating. When front-line caregivers are forced to reconcile their mission of healing people with threats to their personal safety, it creates deep moral distress. It's no surprise that many are ultimately choosing to move on to other careers rather than place themselves in harm's way. When they suffer, so eventually do the patients in need of care. Fewer workers translate into fewer people to keep care beds and vital care services open, weakening quality and access for everyone.

There have been efforts to prevent violence and create safer environments. Some facilities, for instance, have made progress through new approaches to de-escalation training, upgraded alert systems and preventative technology, and strengthened codes of conduct for patients and visitors. But the magnitude of this crisis requires interventions at the state level. After years of competing yet similar legislation, our organizations — representing hospitals and health systems, nurses, and other front-line caregivers — have come together to champion a single proposal that would address safety and violence prevention in local health care facilities. This consensus legislation extends far beyond what one organization or care team can accomplish on their own.

[The bill](#) takes a common-sense approach to an increasingly alarming problem. For health care facilities, it establishes a standardized framework for violence prevention and response, constructed in collaboration with employees and labor representatives, while

setting up new state-level reporting procedures. Suspected offenders would now face a felony charge if they knowingly and intentionally assault a health care employee in the line of duty, with language developed in consultation with Massachusetts district attorneys. For individuals in a behavioral health crisis, and therefore without intent, the bill would identify pathways to ensure appropriate treatment, prevent harm against both patients and their caregivers, and to avoid arrests.

Most importantly: For our front-line workers, this proposal would entitle victims to paid leave and legal support following a violent incident. And it would send a powerful message that entering a health care facility is no different than entering an airport, where there are hard-line expectations around threatening or putting one's hands on an employee.

The House of Representatives [unanimously passed the legislation](#) last November. The proposal is now with the Senate, where we are hopeful that members will take up a vote before the session ends on July 31. Just as our organizations found common ground to address this crisis, lawmakers can do the same. They can pass this bill to protect our state's health care workers and provide them the security that they desperately need to do their jobs.

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