Washington State Department of
Labor & Industries
Division of Occupational Safety and Health

Q&A **Questions and Answers:**
Panic Buttons: Guidance for
Employers in the Hospitality Industry

Background A new law, RCW 49.60.515, was passed to protect isolated workers in certain workplaces from sexual harassment and assault. One provision of the law requires affected employers to "provide a panic button to each employee" covered by RCW 49.60.515 (1) (d).

Employers and Employees

Who is required to provide panic buttons?

RCW 49.60.515 (1) (d) requires hotel, motel, and retail employers with at least one employee to provide panic buttons.

Property service contractors (i.e., commercial janitorial services) with at least one employee are also subject to this requirement.

Are franchisers or franchisees responsible for providing panic buttons?

The franchisee, or their contractors, are responsible for providing panic buttons (not franchisers or corporate entities).

Are day labor staffing agencies required to provide the protections for their isolated workers?

The employer directly supervising the work of employees is obligated to provide safety measures for employees; however, the supervising employer may choose to work with other employers including staffing/contractor or staffing/subcontractor to provide these safety measures. The staffing agency is still responsible to ensure adequate safety measures are in place to protect their workers.

Are employers responsible for issuing panic buttons to contractors and subcontractors?

The employer directly supervising the work of employees is obligated to provide safety measures for employees; however, the supervising employer may choose to work with other employers including a contractor or subcontractor to provide these safety measures. The employer providing the employee is still responsible to ensure adequate safety measures are in place to protect their workers.

Which employees are covered?

The panic button provision covers workers employed as janitors, some security guards*, hotel and motel housekeepers, and room service attendants who:

- Spend a majority of their working hours alone, or
- Don't spend a majority of their working hours alone, but their primary work responsibility involves working without another coworker present.

Are temporary employees covered?

Yes.

What does "alone" mean? A closed partition? No line of sight?

"Alone" means outside of direct line-of-sight of coworkers or other personnel of the company they work for, such as in a separate room, building, etc.

Would a team of two housekeepers working in hotel rooms next to or across the hallway from each other require personal panic buttons?

Yes. These employees are considered "alone" and the RCW requires a panic button for each employee covered.

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* Licensed contracted security guards are exempt from the panic button provision.

When does an employee need to carry a panic button?

An employee needs to carry a panic button at each work site where they spend more than 50 percent of their daily working hours alone or without another coworker present.

When would an employee use a panic button?

An employee may use the panic button if they have been harmed, reasonably believes there is a risk of harm, or there is another emergency in the employee's presence.

Panic Buttons

What is a panic button?

A panic button is an "emergency contact device" designed to be carried by the user and to summon immediate on-scene assistance from a security guard, coworker, or other employer-designated personnel.

What types of panic buttons are acceptable?

The following effectiveness criteria can help you select an acceptable panic button device (and system) for your workplace:

- The panic button is designed to be carried by the user (e.g., lanyards, clip-ons, etc.)
- The device should be simple to activate (e.g., a single action like a push, pull, or tap provides a sustained signal) without delays caused by entering passwords or waiting for the system to turn on.
- When activated, the signal is effective for the circumstances (e.g., designated personnel will be able to detect it regardless of their location and distinguish it from other audible or visual alarms and noise from vacuum cleaners and other sources.)
- The device is designed to summon immediate assistance and allows responders to accurately identify the user's location.
- The device reliably works in all locations on all shifts and the activation of one device won't obscure the activation of others.
- The device should minimize inadvertent activation and resist possible disabling by attackers.

Do audible alarms comply with the panic button requirements?

Yes, if there are coworkers close enough to hear and recognize the auditory alarm above other environmental noises at the work site (vacuum cleaner, factory noises etc.).

Response and Assistance

What is "immediate"?

Immediate on-scene assistance means that the assistance is provided within a reasonable amount of time to confirm:

- An emergency is taking place.
- An equipment failure did not occur, and
- To summon emergency services.

Do emergency services count as immediate assistance from a "representative of the employer"?

In rare circumstances. In order to use emergency services (such as police, fire, or emergency medical services) as the immediate response team, the employer must contact local emergency services and receive approval that those agencies would be available to provide those services.

How specific must the panic button be in providing the user's location (i.e. building, floor, room, in car en route to other work sites)?

The location needs to be as specific as the work location necessitates to allow assistance to be provided when an alarm is triggered. Employers may use different methods in order to pinpoint an employee's location, such as:

- A schedule of where the employee would be at a certain time.
- An auditory alarm that also produces a signal to a responder.
- An employee providing status updates of their location as it changes.
- An employee working with a partner when there is a poor signal (parking garage, no WiFi available, etc.)

Does the person assigned to respond to the panic button alarm need to be on site?

The person assigned does not need to be on-site, but employees must not be relied upon to intervene in violent incidents without training, experience, and education qualifying them to do so.

What about signaling devices like horns, strobes, or buzzers?

These typically do not meet the effectiveness criteria (e.g., if they require the user to hold down a button to sustain a signal then they wouldn't be considered "simple to activate".)

Can we use communication devices like radios, cellphones, or pagers?

Many off-the-shelf or consumer-grade devices may not meet the effectiveness criteria for simple activation and reliability. For example, verify all operational mechanisms of wireless systems (e.g., Bluetooth, cellular data, wireless internet, etc.) are in place and functional.

What else helps ensure effectiveness?

Maintenance is important to ensure panic buttons (and systems) continue to work. Periodic system checks can help you identify and correct problems.

Training is also important; include:

- Instruction on both use and response.
- Information on device limitations.
- How to maintain and replace devices.

Who pays for panic buttons, batteries, maintenance, etc.?

Employers are responsible to provide and pay for panic buttons; this would include batteries and other consumables, and all service and maintenance related to devices and systems.