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## Workplaces make safety a priority for women

By Jennifer Calhoun  
Staff writer

On a Monday morning in May, an Embarq telephone company employee was raped and beaten while working outside an abandoned home in Raeford.

She was just doing her job, but like other women who work outside the traditional office setting as home health-care workers, real estate agents and cable company employees, she was vulnerable to attack.

In June 2005, real estate agent Kathleen Yaggi went to meet someone she thought was a potential home buyer in Raeford. But when the man got into her car, investigators say he tried to attack her then shot her three times in the stomach.

Yaggi survived and continues to practice real estate, but she still gets nervous on occasion.

"Once in a while, I still run across something that makes me blink," she said. "The first time I put a man in my car, I was just panicked. But you've got to do it."

In 2004, the N.C. Association of Realtors and the N.C. Real Estate Commission put out a nine-page safety pamphlet for real estate agents. They also made safety training part of the mandatory course for yearly licensing.

"Twenty-one real estate professionals were murdered while on the job in the United States in 2000," the preface of the manual reads. "Between 1982 and 2000, 206 agents died as a result of violent assaults. Many more were raped, beaten or robbed."

The pamphlet gives detailed instructions on safety practices, the main points of which tell agents to: Identify the person they are working with before spending any time alone with him; carry a cell phones at all times; and trust their instincts.

"We're trying to be proactive," said Pam Hill, a real estate agent for Coldwell Banker United of Moore County. "We've taken the subject head-on."

Other companies with field employees have similar policies in place.

Melissa Buscher, a spokeswoman for Time Warner Cable, said the company holds weekly safety meetings and ongoing safety programs for its 700 field employees. Forty-three of those employees are women, Buscher said.

The programs have included visits from law enforcement, an observation skills class and a self-defense course.

Buscher said the main advice the company gives employees is to leave a situation that doesn't feel right.

Employees are required to call into the office as soon as they reach a location and to call back when they leave, she said.

### Precautions

Tom Hill of Apria Healthcare, a respiratory therapy and equipment company, said he has requested two police escorts since 1991 for employees who weren't comfortable going to a particular house or neighborhood.

All six of his respiratory therapists are women who frequently go on calls outside the office, he said. The calls can last 15 minutes to an hour and a half.

While Hill said he's never had a problem with employees being assaulted, the company takes safety seriously.

"If we know we're going into an area that has a reputation for problems, we'll ask another employee to (come along) or ask the patient to come into the office," he said.

Sometimes, however, it's not enough to be cautious.

Tom Matthews, a spokesman for Embarq, said the company always has emphasized safety and usually will ask workers to double up on assignments where the neighborhood is considered dangerous.

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The employee who was raped had been to that neighborhood many times and had no reason to fear it, Matthews said.

Police say the victim was attacked by Grady Cunningham, a homeless man who was staying in an abandoned house on the street where the Embarq employee was working.

Cunningham approached her, forced her to the rear of the house, then dragged her inside. He beat and raped her, only releasing her when she promised not to call lawmen, police said.

### **Fight or flight**

In situations like that, awareness tips and self-defense techniques could prove useful, said Joe McGee, owner of Mpire Boxing Gym at Cliffdale and Reilly roads.

"Everyone has a built-in alarm system," McGee said. "But most people override it."

"Fight or Flight," a class offered at Mpire, allows students to learn basic boxing techniques and self-defense tips.

One technique women can use involves holding their keys in a closed fist and punching the attacker with them, instructor Khalil Shakeel said.

"It makes the punch so much stronger," Shakeel said.

He said women also can escape by using the attacker's weight against him and using pivot techniques to slip out of the attacker's grasp.

But there also was this simple advice: Run.

"The whole point is to get away," he said.

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