

WeirFoulds Employment Law Hot Takes: Workplace Consequences for Crying Wolf – Employment Lessons from a Movie Theatre Gun Scare

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A recent clickbait-gone-wrong incident at a Toronto area movie theatre is a good reminder to employers (and their employees) that words alone can have legitimate consequences. In March 2026 during a late-night screening, three individuals yelled to the crowd that someone in the theatre was in possession of a firearm, forcing moviegoers to evacuate. Police later determined that the scare was deliberately staged by the young men to generate social media attention for a video they were filming. What was supposed to be a harmless prank resulted in criminal charges for the three men and disrupted public safety of those around them.

While most workplaces don't resemble a darkened movie theatre, there's a workplace lesson to be learned: false alarms can carry serious consequences. Employees who make bad faith allegations of violence, harassment, or discrimination may face serious discipline. Ontario law has upheld consequences where employees fabricated serious allegations against colleagues for improper purposes, such as retaliation or self-interest. In one case, an employee accused a supervisor of making physical threats, but after a thorough investigation, the allegation was found to be entirely unsubstantiated and motivated by bad faith. In another, a store clerk falsely claimed a colleague threatened him with a knife, and the employer ultimately concluded that the story was fabricated to get the colleague in trouble. In both of these cases, the employee who made the false complaint was terminated.

For employers, the key takeaway is finding the right balance between encouraging legitimate complaints and recognizing those made in bad faith. Organizations must continue to encourage good-faith reporting and conduct prompt, thorough, and impartial investigations into workplace concerns. Critically, there is an important distinction between a complaint that is ultimately found to be unsubstantiated and one that is made dishonestly, recklessly, or for an improper purpose. Where an employer can establish that a complaint was made in bad faith, discipline may be justified by the law. Clear policies, proper investigations, and well-documented decision-making that is paired with a positive workplace culture grounded in trust, respectful communication, and strong interpersonal relationships can reduce the risk of retaliatory or bad faith complaints, while ensuring that manufactured panic does not overshadow genuine workplace concerns.

The information and comments herein are for the general information of the reader and are not intended as advice or opinion to be relied upon in relation to any particular circumstances. For particular application of the law to specific situations, the reader should seek professional advice.

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