

Domestic Violence Affects the Workplace

Women are at risk for violence at home, in the community and in the workplace. An estimated 52.3 million women are physically assaulted and 17.7 million women are raped or sexually assaulted at least once in their lifetimes. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, for women, homicide was the second leading cause of death on the job in 2003. In fact, security experts at a recent seminar hosted by Omaha's Marcotte Insurance indicated that domestic violence situations were by far the most common potentially violent events they experienced at their worksites and they warned other employers to be prepared.

And what affects employees affects their employers. With nearly one in three women reporting abuse at some time in their lives, domestic violence is likely to affect almost every workplace. The good news is that employers who address it can provide real help to victims and reduce the associated risks.

Employers have many reasons to consider violence against women a workplace issue - both ethical and "bottom line" reasons. The impact of domestic violence on the workplace includes lost wages, absenteeism, non-productivity, and related financial costs. In fact, one study indicates that employers absorb a large portion of the health care costs related to domestic violence, which total nearly \$4.1 billion each year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence equals \$727.8 million, with more than 7.9 million paid workdays lost each year.

But the good news is, the workplace is a great place for victims to receive the help and support they need to get safe, and maintaining an income gives a victim a choice and a chance to leave a violent relationship.

Domestic violence affects the workplace when an abuser harasses an employee who is on the job, when a victim is absent because of injuries or less productive due to stress - or when violence occurs at the worksite. Helping employees who are experiencing abuse can be a real challenge for human resource professionals and managers - but it is a challenge worth meeting. Just as employers deal with substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, disability and sexual harassment, they can address domestic violence. Doing so begins with a strategic plan and written policies and procedures - and with a real commitment to offer support and resources to those in need.

As with other forms of workplace violence, it is important to take a proactive approach to the issue. We recommend that employers partner with local domestic violence experts like YWCA Omaha. We provide critical services to domestic violence victims and to batterers, and we welcome the opportunity to work with employers to create awareness and develop solutions for their unique businesses. We will work with you to better help

you recognize domestic violence; respond with appropriate policies, procedures, and sensitivity; and refer your employees to appropriate internal and community resources.

Employer actions produce results

In a 2002 study, two in three (66 percent of) corporate leaders identified domestic violence as a major social issue.

At a meeting of health benefit managers from small and large businesses around the country, all 25 participants described the effects of domestic violence in the workplace as absenteeism, inability to focus, poor self-esteem, low productivity, and low morale. These same managers noted that employers who take steps to prevent domestic violence see improvements in performance, productivity, health, work site safety, job retention, and other outcomes related to employee well being.

→When a sample group of 40 abused employees at the factory began using the domestic abuse counseling services, their average absence rate was higher than the factory's average absence rate. After using counseling service, the abused employees reduced their absenteeism rates to normal.

Numerous corporations, businesses and agencies are already addressing domestic violence with great success. With assistance from YWCA Omaha, you can make a difference in your workplace and in the lives of employees who are facing abuse.

Workplace Violence Statistics

- Women are the victims in 80 percent of rapes and sexual assaults that take place in the workplace - at least 29,000 acts of rape or sexual assault each year.
- Women who have been raped or sexually assaulted report diminished work functioning, sometimes for up to eight months after the attack.
- An estimated one million women are stalked each year in the U.S., and about one-fourth of them report missing work as a result of the stalking, missing an average of 11 days. Stalkers often follow the victim to the workplace.
- Ninety-four percent of corporate security directors surveyed rank domestic violence as a high security problem at their company.
- One study of female domestic violence victims found that 44 percent were left without transportation when the abuser disabled the car or hid the car keys.

- In a survey of 7,000 women, 37 percent said domestic violence had a negative impact on their job performance.

- Among a group of abused employees receiving workplace counseling, the average absenteeism rate of the group at the time of beginning counseling was about 30 percent higher than the average employee absenteeism rate.

Sources for the information provided in this article were The Family Prevention Fund and the Colorado Bar Association.