

Domestic Violence and its Potential Consequences in Workplace: How to Protect Your Workers

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Daily reports of incidents of domestic violence are an unfortunate reality across our nation. Recent events in San Bernardino, California, and Cookeville, Tennessee, remind us that domestic violence issues sometimes spill over into the workplace, sometimes causing loss of life and/or serious injuries. Domestic violence is defined as violence at the hands of a current or former intimate partner or family member. It is often physical violence, but just as often, it is psychological and emotional as well. Domestic violence occurs at about the same rate across all ethnic, racial, and cultural lines, and no relationship between domestic violence and educational or economic status has been established. According to one statistic, 1 in 5 women in the United States is or has been involved in an abusive relationship, and 44 percent of Americans say they know of someone in an abusive relationship.

As troubling as these numbers are, what's equally troubling is that there seems to be no safe haven from domestic violence. Notably, the workplace is frequently one of the places victims feel safest and seek refuge, but it is also one of the places where abusers know their victims can routinely be found. The leading cause of death for women at work is homicide, and 33 percent of women killed at work are killed by a current or former intimate partner. Given these statistics, it's in employers' interests to ensure that they are informed on the best ways to protect employees, prevent domestic violence incidents in the workplace, and respond to violent offenders who enter the premises.

Create a Culture of Support

Employees dealing with domestic violence issues are frequently reluctant to share their circumstances because they fear the social stigma of victimization or because they fear workplace reprisals. Comprehensive workplace violence policies may help proactively and effectively address these concerns. Such policies can encourage employees to come forward when they need help with the assurance that their personal circumstances will not be exploited or used against them in the workplace. Anti-violence policies can be used to change workplace culture and create an environment where domestic violence victims are encouraged to alert appropriate workplace contacts about domestic violence threats—even when the threats may not seem serious. In this regard, it's helpful for employees to have consistent and reliable avenues to confidentially report threats and concerns about violence and be educated about the importance of doing so.

Once threats and concerns are reported, an employer's security, safety, and legal personnel should be able to take all steps to secure the workplace. Strong general safety procedures often help reduce the number of domestic violence related incidents in the workplace. Effectively managing egress and ingress procedures, visitor protocols, and general premises security (e.g., secured parking lots and security cameras) are vital to the creation of a safe workplace campus. Other preventive steps often include informing employees about threats on a "need to know" basis, alerting local law enforcement about violence concerns, and seeking legal restraining orders. When an employer's actions consistently demonstrate a commitment to safety, they have the dual effects of limiting perpetrators' ability to inflict harm and inspiring employees to report their concerns.

Recognize the Issue

While there is no single profile of a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence, there are behaviors that have been shown to frequently precede extreme acts of violence. It is important for human resources (HR) professionals and managers/supervisors to familiarize themselves with the warning signs so that timely intervention and prevention is possible. The behaviors that are highly correlated to domestic violence include the following.

Victim Behavior

Tardiness/Absenteeism. Twenty-five percent of women who claim that they are in abusive relationships report that the abuse has caused them to be late to work on more than one occasion. Employees in abusive relationships lose an average of seven days of work time every year due to domestic violence.

Inexplicable Injuries/Frequent Reports of Accidents. It is very common for those in abusive relationships to appear at work with black eyes, eye swelling, and other bumps and bruises.

Perpetrator Behavior

Frequent Calls/Visits to the Workplace. Abusive behavior is most often an attempt to control the individual who is being abused. The perpetrator's frequent visits and calls are an effort to stay informed as to whom the abused individual is talking and with whom the abused individual is visiting.

Threats. Threats of violence are intended to direct behavior. An abuser often uses threats of violence to control the relationship. Moreover, it is not uncommon for an abuser to threaten employees who come to the defense of an abused individual.

Employers can educate themselves and their employees about the signs of domestic violence and the actions individuals and organizations can take to safely intervene. Front line supervisors are typically the first to observe these behaviors, and employers need their immediate feedback about concerning behaviors. Additionally, all employers can empower their employees to bring concerns about suspected abuse and domestic violence to the attention of the workplace crisis management team as soon as concerning behavior is observed.

Respond to the Issue

The key to preventing workplace violence and lessening the severity of the acts that do occur is taking note of the warning signs in the earliest stages. But recognizing the early warning signs is not

enough, on its own, to prevent acts of violence. It is essential to respond to the warning signs. A response should include the following actions:

- **Acknowledge the Behavior.** To establish a culture of dignity and respect, address inappropriate behavior in the earliest stages and by the closest supervision level. All supervisors can be trained to conduct counseling sessions with employees as soon as they notice behavior indicative of an employee having trouble.
- **Document and Report to HR.** First level supervisors are the eyes and ears of the organization. They have more face-to-face contact with employees than any other level of management. But they need not be alone in dealing with potentially problematic employees. Even when the appropriate intervention has been made, supervisors can be instructed to make sure that they are not making decisions in vacuums and to make others (HR, security, upper management, etc.) aware of concerns about employees.
- **Make Referrals and Get Others Involved.** Employers should make sure that they are taking full advantage of the resources available to them. As soon as issues arise with employees, employers can consult with their employee assistance program (EAP) to find out what resources are available for employee counseling. If threats have been made, it would be appropriate to contact local law enforcement.

Intense Information Campaign

Publicize Policies

Employers' workplace violence policies work best when they are widely disseminated and explained, in detail, to employees. One of the most important things an employer can do is inform *all* of its employees of what the company has done to prevent workplace violence and what it is they can do to support the company's efforts. Employees suffering from domestic violence must understand that their employers are there to help keep them safe in the workplace and the role that they play in helping to keep their coworkers safe. Employers can publicize their new or revamped workplace violence policies in a number of ways, for example, by posting the policy in common areas and having new employees sign off on the policy.

What Should Your Policies Say?

Importantly, employers should inform employees that in the event of an actively violent incident, they have the obligation to remove themselves from harm's way (i.e., run). If they find that running will place them in danger, they should find shelter in place (i.e., hide). As an absolute last resort, employees should know that you do not want them to be victims. They should do all that they can to survive a violent altercation (i.e., fight).

Convey to employees the expectation that they will help establish and maintain a violence-free workplace, and encourage them to report their concerns to HR.

Conclusion

Preventing workplace violence incidents in the workplace requires a group effort. Workplaces are safer when all employees are educated about the signs of domestic violence and informed about the

steps they can take to prevent violent incidents. Employers may want to take efforts to ensure that their workplace violence policies are robust and constantly evolving to respond to potential threats. It is ultimately an employer's preparation and commitment to protecting its employees that gives it the power to save lives.

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