

Handling domestic violence

How partner violence impacts the workplace and what employers can do

Partner violence — also known as domestic violence — is most commonly viewed as a personal issue and is associated with someone's home life. While it's true that partner violence often occurs in and around a home, it doesn't stay at home when the victim and the abuser go to work.

"Partner violence is a workplace issue because the behavior impacts the workplace and is costly to employers," says Sandra Caffo, the senior director of LifeSolutions, a UPMC WorkPartners affiliate.

Smart Business spoke with Caffo about partner violence and the impact it has on the workplace, employers and employees.

How would you define partner violence?

Partner violence is a pattern of abusive behavior that is done by one person to control a partner. It's not about being angry. It's not an over-reaction to a partner making a mistake. The goal is for the abuser to let the partner know who's in charge. This behavior can be physical, sexual, psychological or emotional. Most often the abuser is a man and the person being abused is a woman, but there are female abusers as well. And, partner violence happens in all types of relationships — married, unmarried, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered — and it touches all economic groups.

What is the scope of partner violence in the workplace?

According to statistics from Standing Firm, an organization in Southwest Pennsylvania that is dedicated to addressing partner violence as a workplace issue, more than one in five full-time employed adults have been victims of partner violence and 64 percent of those say that their work performance has been significantly impacted as a result. This includes receiving harassing phone calls, e-mails and text messages at work to having the abuser come to the partner's worksite and verbally or physically assault that employee.

Abusers are also employees. Employed abusers have told researchers that they have misused company time and resources — such as phones, computers, e-mail and automobiles — to remind the partner that they are always present. Each and ev-



Sandra Caffo
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ery workplace, regardless of size, can be impacted by partner violence.

How does partner violence impact the workplace?

First, partner violence is costly to employers. There are the direct costs, such as the hospital visits required by the abused individual and the cost of ongoing care. In addition, there is the problem with absenteeism and presenteeism. Many times, abused employees are not productive at work because they may have been up all night protecting themselves from or being harassed by the abuser. They also arrive at work late as the abuser may hide their clothes, hide the keys to the car and/or threaten not to take care of the children.

Secondly, partner violence doesn't just impact the person being abused. It also affects that person's co-workers. Because so many people work in cubicles rather than offices, many times co-workers overhear threatening phone calls to a person near them. They don't know what to do to help and may even be fearful for their safety, as well as the safety of the co-worker, and worried that the abuser might come to the workplace and harm them as well. This raises the stress

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level for everyone and interferes with workplace focus and productivity.

What kinds of things should an employer do about partner violence?

It's a concern that only about 5 percent of all employers have a policy in place to deal with partner violence. Most employers still view this as a personal issue to be handled outside of work.

So the first thing employers can do is recognize the ways that their workplace and work force are being affected by partner violence. Step two is to build on that recognition by putting a plan in place to address the issue. This includes developing a policy and should involve human resources staff, managers, security and an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if you have one. The policy formalizes the company's commitment and outlines the responsibilities for all parties to ensure safety.

How can an EAP work to make the situation better?

The EAP will assist the employer to develop a plan of action, including a policy. It helps both the employee being abused as well as the employee who is the abuser get help, thereby making it a worthwhile and effective company investment.

The EAP is an important internal resource to confidentially enable the employee being abused to develop a safety plan and get access to needed community resources. Abused employees are often ashamed even though they don't cause this, and may be fearful to tell the employer about what's going on. The EAP does not share information without written permission, so it is a trusted source to go to.

EAPs can also help an abuser get help. It is possible to learn new and safe ways of interacting with loved ones.

Finally, the EAP supports co-workers who are impacted. Figuring out how to approach an employee when concerned or addressing fears about safety are examples.

For information about resources in Southwestern Pennsylvania that deal with this issue, visit Standing Firm's website at www.standingfirmswpa.com. <<

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