

When Domestic Violence Enters the Workplace

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Some of you may have observed an employee whose attendance and performance has deteriorated. When at work, the employee acts anxious and may wear long-sleeved and high-necked clothing, even in hot weather. The employee's spouse may call every day, interrupting your employee's work. Although, invited out the employee always has an excuse why she can't attend. These are all signs that your employee may be a victim of domestic violence. Some human resource professionals believe domestic violence is a personal matter and look the other way. It is a personal matter, but it is also a business matter. If you don't provide some help to employees and implement certain measures at work, it may result in lost productivity for your company and other employees may be exposed to potential workplace violence, raising security issues.

According to a survey conducted by Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, of 1,200 surveyed workers, 21 percent reported they currently were or had been a victim of domestic violence and forty-four percent indicated they have experienced the impact of domestic violence in the workplace.

How can you help employees experiencing domestic violence? According to Domestic Abuse Intervention Services, serving southern Wisconsin, you can:

- **Express your concerns.** Let the employee know that you are worried about his or her safety, that you have observed behavior changes, and would like to know what the cause is. If you don't know, you can't develop a prevention or response plan.
- **Support, don't judge.** Try to understand if the employee decides to stay with his or her spouse or significant other. On average, it takes 7 attempts to permanently leave an abusive relationship.
- **Encourage the employee to contact your EAP or a domestic abuse service.** These services should be able to provide resources for your employee.
- **Document the abuse.** Document when you see signs of abuse, what they looked like, and when they occurred. This will prove on-going abuse in a court of law (rather than a one-time loss of temper). Such supervisory documentation has helped those abused in court cases.
- **Don't play mediator between your employee and the abuser.** You don't want to become a personal target and your employee may resent interference.
- **Provide help in obtaining protection orders.** Encourage the employee to get a restraining order that includes the workplace. The order helps protect your company and employees.
- **Ensure the employee's emergency contact information is current.** You will have someone to contact in the event the employee is missing or unreachable.
- **Have a plan in place for screening telephone calls and remove the employee's name from automated telephone directories.** This will reduce or eliminate harassing phone calls that disrupt the workplace.
- **Accommodate the employee's requests.** The employee may need time off for court appearances. A different workstation in a secure place where there is a barrier between the employee and the entrance may be needed.
- **Ensure the employee's privacy.** Be respectful of the level of confidentiality the employee would like to work with when providing assistance or when asking other employees to be vigilant.

There are additional steps you can take to safeguard your company and employees:

- **Review your safety plan.** Make sure it includes how to respond to domestic violence in the workplace. Abusers have been known to follow their victims to work, waiting for them outside or even coming into the workplace.
- **Require that employees provide you with copies of any temporary or permanent protection order, including a photo and description of the perpetrator and his/her car.**
- **Educate employees.** Educated employees will not only provide welcome support to those in abusive relationships, but will help all employees understand how to detect abuse and keep themselves safe in the workplace.

Keep in mind that victims of domestic violence may be male employees as well. In fact, male victims are far less likely to be forthcoming about domestic abuse. If a male employee shows any of the same signs as mentioned above, consider that domestic abuse might be occurring.