

Reducing Domestic Violence in the Workplace

Domestic violence has reached epidemic proportions. A 1998 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that 25 percent of women and 8 percent of men surveyed were raped and/or physically assaulted in their lifetime by an intimate partner. In addition to wrecking havoc on their personal lives, domestic violence interferes with the work life of victims in many ways. A battered employee's work performance may deteriorate, and she may need time off to relocate her family, testify against her batterer in a criminal trial, or obtain medical care or a civil restraining order. In addition, a batterer and victim may work at the same place, and the victim may feel constantly threatened and harassed.

Employers frequently respond to such situations by terminating, demoting, or suspending the victims. Between one quarter and one half of domestic violence victims surveyed in three separate studies reported they lost a job due, in part, to domestic violence. Actual or threatened loss of employment aggravates an already difficult situation, since having a job is a key factor in successfully escaping a violent relationship. Employers should be aware that federal, state, and local legislators are beginning to pay greater attention to the workplace problems of domestic violence victims, and civil rights laws may provide some protection to battered applicants and employees.

In the case of domestic violence, often what starts at home is completed at work. Spousal assault at work is common. For employees being stalked, the workplace is the one location where the victim can usually be found; employees can change phone numbers and move, but most can't switch jobs to avoid a stalker.

Individuals in an abusive relationship are sometimes co-workers. In addition, domestic violence between co-workers may constitute "hostile environment" sexual harassment.

Employers should:

- Amend the company's equal employment opportunity policy to bar discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived status as a victim of domestic violence:
- Prohibit inquiries about a job applicant's current or past exposure to domestic violence, and prohibit staffing decisions based on any assumptions about or knowledge of such exposures:
- Accommodate an employee-victim's need to attend court proceedings, seek medical assistance, meet with a counselor, or relocate to a shelter:
- In cases where it is determined that an employee's work performance difficulties are a result of being a victim of domestic violence, make a referral to an Employee Assistance Program or other appropriate entity:
- Take corrective or disciplinary action in accordance with existing collective bargaining unit agreements, statutes, and regulations against employees who are abusive or violent at work, including those who use workplace phones, faxes, or email to harass their intimate partner; and
- Make training on domestic violence and its impact on the workplace available on a regular basis for all managers, supervisors, employee assistance professionals, human resources personnel, and security staff.

Employers that take these steps will reap further benefits in addition to minimizing legal liability. Employers' attempts to address domestic violence in the workplace will reduce health care costs, decrease absenteeism, and increase employee productivity by eliminating or at least reducing stress and injuries related to domestic abuse.

No company can completely prevent or eliminate workplace violence, but with proper planning and effective programs, the chances of such violent occurrences can be dramatically reduced.