Small Business Initiative on Domestic Violence

Domestic and sexual violence is pervasive and it affects every aspect of our society.

Studies show that at least one in four women is a victim of domestic violence at some point in her life; you almost certainly know someone who is a victim, although you may not be aware of it.

Domestic violence may also already be affecting your workplace.

Even small business owners with limited resources can take simple steps to address the effects of domestic violence in the workplace.

By providing effective support as shown in this brochure you will benefit your employees as well as your bottom line.

The Cost

- $3–$5 billion per year in lost work days and reduced productivity. — Bureau of National Affairs
- $7.5 billion in economic harm relating to out-of-pocket costs. — The National Institute of Justice
- Businesses lose dedicated employees; studies indicate that 24%–52% of surveyed battered women had lost their jobs, at least in part due to abuse. —U. S. General Accounting Office

The Law

In many states and cities, the law provides specific protections for employees so they do not lose their jobs as a result of being a victim of domestic violence. These laws range from requiring employers to give an employee a day off to attend court to making “reasonable accommodations” in the workplace to assist an employee in dealing with the abuse. Victims may also be protected under sex discrimination or other anti-discrimination laws, and they may have a right to time off, accommodations, or other protections under laws addressing injuries, disabilities, or illnesses.

About the Small Business Initiative

The Small Business Initiative is a project of the Safe@Work Coalition. The Coalition was created in 2000 by a group of employers, trade unions, domestic violence advocacy groups, and government organizations. Its mission is to educate employers and unions and to provide guidance on creating an environment where what was traditionally seen as a “private” problem can be openly and effectively addressed. For more information and resources contact our website at: www.safeatworkcoalition.org

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The Myths and the Facts

Myth  
No one who works for me is a victim of domestic violence.

Fact  
At least one in four women in this country has been abused, so chances are one of your employees is or has been a victim of domestic violence.

Myth  
It is the victim’s fault.

Fact  
The only person who can stop the abuse is the person being abusive. People who abuse do so because they need to control a relationship.

Myth  
Domestic violence is a private issue that shouldn’t enter the workplace.

Fact  
Whether or not others in the workplace are aware that a co-worker or employee is a victim of domestic violence, it does enter the workplace. It affects a worker’s productivity, attendance and well-being.

Myth  
Domestic abuse only happens to “poor people.”

Fact  
Spouses of affluent, highly regarded businessmen and government officials as well as low-income individuals are victims of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse affects people of all ages, sexual orientation and from all socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds.

Myth  
If I help a victim of domestic violence, I am exposing myself to liability.

Fact  
By providing support in the form of referrals to qualified social service organizations and accommodating a victim’s needs, you can help a victim address the problem without exposing your business to liability. However, by doing nothing or discriminating against a victim, you may expose your business to liability.

Providing Effective Support

The most significant form of assistance that an employer can provide to an employee who is experiencing domestic violence is: (1) to provide referrals to the organizations that have staff trained to work with this issue, and (2) to help address the employee’s needs in the workplace. The four basic steps for addressing domestic violence are as follows:

1. Say what you see.
   Examples: “I’ve noticed that—
   ...you seem pretty upset
today after that phone call.”
   ...over the last few weeks
   you seem so tired and shaky.”

2. Express concern.
   Examples: “I’m concerned that—
   ...you are having a difficult time.”
   ...you don’t seem yourself lately.”
   ...you’re not usually late or absent
   as much.”
   ...you seem distracted.”

3. Provide support.
   Make reasonable accommoda-
tions to address the situation.
   > Change a phone extension if employee is receiving
   harassing calls.
   > Keep the employee’s home
   address and phone number
   confidential.
   > Allow time off.
   > Transfer employee to a differ-
et desk, department, shift or
   work site.

4. Respect your employee.
   Dealing effectively with domes-
tic violence is a process that
takes time and varies from in-
dividual to individual.

   It is impossible to know from
   the outside what the victim
   should do. You might think
   that the victim should stop
   having any contact with the
   abuser, but that may not be the
   best or safest way to address
   the situation. The two might
   have children together or have
   other reasons to maintain con-
tact. Or you might think that
   the couple should stay together
   and try to work things out in
   counseling. Again, this may not
   be the right answer for indi-
   viduals involved.

   The most powerful and effec-
tive way you can provide sup-
port is to communicate that
you will respect the decisions
your employee makes and that
you will provide reasonable
support at work if requested.

Problems and Solutions

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