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Altria Tackles Domestic Violence; Company Teams with Liz Claiborne to Offer Resource Site

By Abigail Klingbeil, Staff The Journal News

The effects of domestic violence spread far beyond the confines of a house or apartment. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in April reported that domestic violence results in \$1.8 billion in lost productivity, a figure that speaks to the damage to both victims and the U.S. economy.

Altria Group Inc., a major employer in Westchester County, and the women's clothing company Liz Claiborne Inc. created a new Web site, www.safeatworkcoalition.org, as a resource for information about domestic violence in the workplace, the companies announced earlier this week.

"One of the things businesses think is that it might be a private matter, it doesn't affect the workplace. These are myths," says Karen Brosius, an Altria spokeswoman. "Domestic violence costs businesses money."

Domestic violence can also cost businesses their employees' lives when the perpetrator tracks down their victim at work.

The Web site includes domestic violence resources, legal information and examples of domestic violence prevention programs at U.S. companies. The Web site is the culminating project of the 3-year-old Safe@work coalition, which includes Altria and Liz Claiborne, as well as a number of other businesses, labor and women's organizations.

Brosius says Altria's efforts include training security guards to protect violence victims and placing informational brochures about domestic violence in its women's and men's bathrooms. Companies are potentially liable when they fail to protect their employees against domestic violence that reaches the workplace, said Coleen Widell, president of the American Institute of Domestic Violence, which provides domestic violence prevention and awareness training to employers.

Manhattan-based Altria Group selected domestic violence prevention as one of its three main focuses for corporate giving (the arts and hunger prevention are the other two) in the mid-1990s

after its then-chairman, Geoffrey C. Bible, was inspired by a newspaper article that profiled a crusader in the fight against domestic violence.

“Our chairman, Geoffrey Bible, had seen this article and shared it with a number of us and he said, this is a such a critical problem, is there something we can do about this?”

In 1996, Altria sponsored a corporate conference on domestic violence. Since then, it has sponsored more than 40 conferences and workshops on domestic violence prevention and awareness. In 1998, it started the Altria Doors of Hope Program, which gives grants to domestic violence service organizations.

In the past five years, Altria has given \$28 million to organizations that support domestic violence prevention and awareness. Last year, its largest gift was a \$1.5 million three-year grant to Manhattan-based Safe Horizon, with \$1 million dedicated to Ivy House, a new 106-bed emergency shelter for women and their children.

Altria has given money to a number of local organizations involved in domestic violence prevention. Last year, it gave \$15,000 to Northern Westchester Shelter Inc. in Pleasantville, \$36,000 to the Putnam/Northern Westchester Women’s Resource Center in Mahopac and \$10,000 to Westchester/Putnam Legal Services.

Altria, formerly called Philip Morris, employs about 2,200 people in Tarrytown and Rye Brook, mainly through its operating company Kraft Foods Inc. Philip Morris International’s Latin America division and Altria Corporate Services, which provides legal, financial and other services to Altria’s businesses, are based in Rye Brook.

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On the Web

Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence: www.caepv.org

New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence in the workplace:
www.opdv.state.ny.us/workplace

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