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Battling Domestic Abuse in the Workplace – Advocates Stress that Firms Ensure Victims Stay Safe from Violence on the Job

By Melanie Nayer, Globe Correspondent

After learning that one of their workers was a victim of domestic abuse, Partners HealthCare System Inc. jumped into action.

By adding extra security at its Boston headquarters, escorting the victim home and to and from court, and giving her additional paid personal days, management kept their employee safe at work.

“We want to keep victims working. If someone is not working, it gives the perpetrator more access to the victim, and the victim has less financial support to help provide additional safety,” said Donna Kausek, domestic violence specialist for Partners HealthCare. “Keeping workers working is beneficial to everyone.”

Domestic violence doesn’t begin or end in the home. For the approximately 2 million women who are assaulted each year, domestic violence is a safety and health issue that carries over into the workplace.

It is estimated that domestic violence costs American employers between \$3 billion and \$5 billion in lost productivity every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Employers lose another \$100 million in lost wages, paid sick leave, and absenteeism linked to domestic violence cases.

In a 2001 study, the CDC found that on average, domestic violence victims incur \$1,775 more in annual medical costs than other subscribers. Frequent trips to the emergency room, physician’s offices, and more prescription medication can add up, often at the employer’s expense.

In Massachusetts, private employers are not bound by law to provide added security or safety to ensure a victim’s safety in the workplace. However, in addition to antidiscrimination and unemployment laws, legal consultants suggest employers solidify a workplace protection policy as well.

“Public state workers have the right for 15 days of paid leave for counseling and medical care, and up to six months for a leave of absence. Private employees don’t necessarily have this right,”

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according to Karen Whitley, a senior attorney specializing in employment law at Boston-based Hannify & King. “But overall, employees do have rights, and employers have an obligation to provide a safe place of employment.”

Laws alone cannot prevent abuse, but advocates against domestic violence say employers can help provide a safety zone for victims.

The Employers Against Domestic Violence, a nonprofit membership organization that teams Massachusetts employers with specialists in the field of domestic and workplace violence prevention, aims to educate employers about domestic violence’s impact.

“Our mission is to educate employers about the financial, legal, and psychological impact of violence, especially domestic violence, on the workplace, and to identify resources and formulate best practices for prevention, education, and outreach,” said Courtney Cahill, a Plymouth County prosecutor and head of Employers Against Domestic Violence.

Carolyn Wiesenhahn, an attorney at Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo in Boston, and a board member of Employers Against Domestic Violence board member, said that while most companies have the best intentions, confronting a domestic violence situation is tricky.

“Employers want to do the right thing, but doing the right thing can be counterintuitive,” said Wiesenhahn. “Employers will say ‘we will do anything we can to protect you from your abuser, but you have to leave your partner.’ And that can put the victim in a deadly position.”

In some cases, employers have transferred employees to other states or satellite locations. “We’ve gone so far as to relocate an employee across the country to help them,” said J. Abra Degbor, spokeswoman for Verizon Wireless. With the implementation of an employee assistance program, Degbor said managers and victims were better prepared to handle the domestic violence situation. Employee assistance programs are in place to train managers and upper-level executives to deal with domestic violence.

Kathleen Greer, the president of KGA Inc., a Framingham human resources company that focuses on setting up employee assistance programs for businesses, said education is the best form of defense in maintaining a safe workplace.

“Publicizing any kind of violence prevention policy is important and gets the message across,” she said. “If a restraining order is in place, get a photo [of the abuser] to hang in the front desk or reception area. Most importantly, managers should stress confidentiality once they learn about a domestic violence situation.”

But it’s not always the victim that causes the need for concern in the workplace.

“Employers can be employing both the abuser and abusee, and it can be really difficult to tell if you’re employing an abuser. Lots of times the employer would never know,” said Wiesenhahn.

Using workplace resources such as e-mail, office phones and company cars allows easy access for a batterer to harass his or her victim.

In a 2001 focus group conducted by Employers Against Domestic Violence, 29 convicted batterers said the time they spend at work is often consumed by long-distance “monitoring” of their victims.

Several abusers said they made costly and dangerous mistakes on the job as a result of perpetrating domestic violence and most abusers used paid work time to attend court for matters relating to their domestic violence cases.

“Many of these [abusers] are obsessive personalities they obsess when they are not around to monitor their victim so their level of anxiety rises and their ability to do a job in a normal situation is hampered,” said Doug Gaudette, director of family safety at Caritas Holy Family Hospital, a training facility in Methuen certified by the Department of Public Health to work with men who batter. “Many of these guys spend work time placing their victim under surveillance either by phone, by e-mail, faxes, or beepers. The problem is not only are they wrecking her workday, but they are wrecking their workday because their mind is someplace else.”

According to Massachusetts law, a convicted domestic violence perpetrator can be sentenced to counseling sessions, meetings with a probation officer, or jail, all which take time away from work.

Allowing time off from work and maintaining a safe workplace for employees is costly.

“The employer has a responsibility to provide a safe work environment and that can be extremely costly,” said Mary McCall, account supervisor and licensed social worker at The Wellness Corp. in Shrewsbury. “There is also the liability issue if someone gets hurt at work.”

When a victim admits to a domestic violence situation, McCall said employers should immediately put a safety plan into place, which can mean added security, transfers, and additional legal advice.

It is estimated that domestic violence accounts for 27 percent of all incidents of violence in the workplace, and according to Employers Against Domestic Violence.

“We want to encourage victims of domestic violence to disclose their abuse if it is affecting their work,” said Jean Haertl, director of Workplace Violence Prevention for the state. “Less than 10 percent of businesses have a policy on workplace violence that includes domestic violence. We don’t think about it until someone is killed.”

SIDEBAR

According to Employers Against Domestic Violence, when a victim of domestic abuse comes forward, employers should ask the following questions:

- Are you afraid for your safety at work?
- Has this person ever come to the workplace?
- Who is this person?
- Have the police been involved?

Employers should then implement a workplace safety plan by collaborating with local law enforcement and domestic violence programs across the state.

The State Safelink hotline for victims of domestic abuse to use while at work is: 1-877-785-2020.

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