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Business Involvement Spurs Violence

By Mary Lauby / Health Care

Domestic violence and sexual assault may seem odd topics to discuss in a business journal. At closer look, these issues require attention both from the internal perspective of running a successful business and from the external view of a business's role in its community.

Across the country, rates of domestic violence and domestic violence homicides have dropped – by as much as half in some states. Analysis of sexual assault rates is more difficult as the relationship of reporting rates to research on incidence has been less stable and there remains a great taboo about sexual violence in our society.

Where declines in sexual and domestic violence have been documented, there are numerous factors for these declines – increased services and advocacy for victims, heightened public awareness and improved public policies as well as the role that businesses have begun to play in supporting victims and creating workplaces where violence is not tolerated.

Domestic violence and sexual assault don't stay at home when victims and perpetrators and their family members and friends go to work. With nearly one in three women reporting abuse at some time in their lives, violence is likely to affect almost every workplace.

Batterers often harass or otherwise interfere with victims at work. Injuries, lack of sleep and fear often prevent victims from fully being productive and able to maintain employment. For other victims, the workplace is the one place they feel safe or receive support.

Violence also takes place in the workplace at alarming rates. At least 29,000 acts of rape or sexual assault are reported to have been committed in the workplace itself. For women, homicide was the second leading cause of death on the job in 2003.

From the internal perspective, employers have many reasons to consider domestic and sexual violence a workplace issue – lost productivity, health care costs, liability, work force safety and company morale.

One study estimates that domestic violence related health care costs total nearly \$4.1 billion each year – a large portion of which is absorbed by employers. Studies estimate that one million women are stalked each year in the U.S. and about one-fourth of them report missing 11 days of work on average as a result. Most perpetrators are employed and the likelihood of their using work time or resources (e.g., computers, phones, vehicles, etc.) to continue to abuse, stalk or harass victims is high.

It is crucial that employers address domestic abuse as a serious, recognizable and preventable problem the same as thousands of other workplace health and safety issues that affect a business and its bottom line.

Traditional responses have included the development of domestic and sexual violence specific EAP (employee assistance programs), guidelines, practices and protocols. Preventive security measures can be taken, such as investing in alarm systems and better lighting as well as accommodating victims by not listing all names in staff directories and changing shifts or workplace locations.

Making available resources, such as local community-based domestic violence and sexual assault programs, can be a lifeline for victims and their colleagues, families and friends. Allowing employees the flexibility to leave during work hours to attend support groups, obtain support or advocacy, or secure services for their children is crucial, as this is often the only time sexual and domestic violence victims can safely seek services.

Employers who have taken steps to prevent domestic violence and sexual assault or to support victims see improvements throughout the company in performance, productivity, health, work site safety, job retention and other outcomes related to employee well-being.

On the other hand, companies that have experienced the loss of an employee due to assault, serious injury or domestic homicide have found themselves wishing they'd known the victim was in danger or that they'd have known how to help.

Employers can also play a critical role in helping to prevent sexual assault and domestic violence both within the workplace and in the communities where they do business. The activities are simple – such as putting up posters on company bulletin boards, placing informational brochures in discreet locations so victims can obtain important information out of sight of co-workers or supervisors, or adopting a company policy regarding domestic and sexual violence.

All of these strategies can help educate the work force, breaking down the myths and stereotypes about who is a victim and who is a perpetrator, thereby reducing the stigma so that victims reach out for help.

Consider how your work force might most benefit from company strategies to address violence. For example, companies that employ substantial numbers of teens can play an important role in establishing social norms in the workplace that prevent sexual and domestic violence, reinforcing the violence prevention messages they are hearing elsewhere and counteracting messages that might promote sexual and domestic violence so common in mainstream media.

Hands-on activities such as volunteering at local programs, providing in-kind services and making financial contributions are always welcome. Showing leadership can also take the form of being vocal allies. Businesses, for example, have helped shape national legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and state proposals to provide unemployment insurance for domestic violence victims.

Finally, consider how you might affect a broader spectrum by examining your customer or vendor bases. For instance, does your insurance carrier discriminate by refusing to write health insurance policies for victims of domestic violence, calling it a pre-existing condition? If so, you might contemplate changing providers.

Encourage your vendors to adopt workplace policies that support victims. If your customer base is substantially elderly, you might consider providing an informational flyer about sexual abuse in later life with the next monthly billing. This type of information may be seen by clients and customers as a value-added service that boosts your company's profile and employee morale.

Addressing domestic violence and sexual assault will make a difference in the lives of your employees as well as your company's bottom line. And, while you're at it, you will be taking significant steps toward eradicating domestic violence and sexual assault in the community.

Mary R. Lauby joined Jane Doe Inc., the Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence, in January. JDI is the statewide organization of over 60 community-based sexual assault and domestic violence organizations.

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