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Businesses Take Stand on Domestic Violence

By Rosalind Bentley (rbentley@ajc.com)

Last year, a local Verizon Wireless employee let her employers in on a dangerous secret: She was being harassed and abused by her boyfriend and feared for her life.

She wasn't a high-ranking officer of the corporation, but the company responded as though she was. The human resource office helped the woman develop an escape plan, relocate to another city, then helped her put together a safety plan to keep her new home a secret from her abuser.

"She deserved to live free of fear," said Sheryl Sellaway, Verizon spokeswoman.

They wanted to keep her safe, but they also wanted to keep her on the job.

Though dramatic, it is one example of how employers can and do respond to domestic violence as a workplace issue. Sellaway will be one of several speakers delivering that message on Thursday when the Partnership Against Domestic Violence sponsors a workshop designed to teach businesses how to deal with the issue. The Partnership operates Gwinnett County's only emergency shelter for battered women and their children,

"When Domestic Violence Goes to Work: Developing a Workplace Response," co-sponsored by the Georgia Labor Department and the Society for Human Resource Management of Atlanta, will be held at the Loudermilk Center in downtown Atlanta. It's a half-day session that will try to convince employers that dealing with the age-old problem could actually help improve their bottom line.

Almost a third of American women say they have been abused either physically, verbally and/or psychologically, by their husbands or partners, according a 1999 report by the Commonwealth Fund. That the abuse or the effects of it would be confined only to the four walls of a woman's home is a naive assumption, said Cathy Willis Spraez, CEO of Partnership Against Domestic Violence.

"If he keeps her up at night or is physically abusing her, she's exhausted when she gets to work or she gets to work late," Willis Spraez said. "Or he might be calling her at work all the time harassing her.

"We know this happens because it's what victims report to us all the time."

But is that really an employer's problem? Wouldn't it just be easier to dismiss a problematic employee, one who calls in "sick" a lot or is chronically late, rather than delve into a potentially dangerous situation?

According to a report by the Family Violence Prevention Fund, 37 percent of women who are domestic abuse victims said the abuse affects their work in various ways from tardiness to missed days to inability to hold down a job at all. And in a 2003 study, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that lost productivity due to domestic violence came to just under \$730 million annually. Nearly 8 million paid workdays are lost each year as well, according to the same study.

Yet companies often take the stand that domestic violence is a private, family matter; not something a business should get involved in.

Willis Spraez and others say that not dealing with the problem or simply firing the woman can actually make a bad situation worse. She points to a 1995 survey of corporate security directors — 94 percent of them ranked domestic violence as a high security problem at their company.

Dennis Butler is vice president of associate relations for Liz Claiborne, Inc., a New York-based company that ran a well-received "Love is Not Abuse" anti-domestic violence campaign in the early 1990s. He said it is not unusual for an abuser to harass other store employees if he is denied the opportunity to speak directly with his victim.

A specific case prompted the corporation to come up with a full-fledged policy for helping employees in distress. It refers women to appropriate shelters or crisis centers for help. The company also puts together a threat assessment team of human resource managers, attorneys and corporate security. Security guards are placed in the woman's store if she is being harassed and the company makes cell phones for emergency use available to her as well.

"A strange measure of our success is that we are getting more reports now" from employees, said Butler, who will be presenting at Thursday's conference. "In the last 2½ years, we've had about 50 cases, from our corporate offices to our distribution centers to our stores."

One policy companies should look at in dealing with domestic violence victims is a "second-chance" option, Willis Spraez said. Any employee about to be fired who reveals that domestic abuse has contributed to poor performance should be given a second chance, she said.

She should be referred to an appropriate anti-violence program for help and perhaps offered a leave of absence to get assistance.

Doing so could enable the woman to get out of a dangerous situation and eventually come back to work and be more productive.

"Give her a second chance," Willis Spraez said. "She may wind up being the best employee you ever had."

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

- **WHAT:** “When Domestic Violence Goes to Work: Developing a Workplace Response.”
- **WHEN:** Thursday
- **WHERE:** Loudermilk Center, 100 Edgewood Ave., Atlanta
- **TO REGISTER:** Call the Partnership Against Domestic Violence at 404-870-9605 or visit www.shrmatlanta.org and click on Upcoming Events and select the April calendar.

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