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Companies Call For EAPs to Assist in Identifying and Helping Domestic Violence Victims

By Jessica Marquez

Lost-productivity costs as a result of domestic violence add up to \$727.8 million annually, and 7.9 million paid workdays are lost a year, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. An employer coalition is seeking to work with employee assistance programs to ensure that they know how to spot the signs of abuse.

Often when employers think about domestic violence issues affecting their employees, it's in the context of workplace safety. They ask themselves what they would do if a violent partner showed up on company premises.

But an increasing number of employers are realizing that domestic violence has broader implications for productivity, absenteeism and health care costs, not to mention the well-being—and even survival—of employees who are victims of domestic violence.

A recent survey of 1,200 full-time employed adults conducted by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, a Bloomington, Illinois-based coalition of employers and nonprofit organizations, found that 21 percent were victims of domestic violence.

Each domestic violence incident results in \$948 in health care costs for women and \$387 for men, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Lost-productivity costs as a result of domestic violence add up to \$727.8 million annually, and 7.9 million paid workdays are lost a year, according to the CDC.

As a result, the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence is discussing working with employee assistance programs to establish formal guidelines on how to identify and handle employees who are victims of domestic abuse.

“Instead of each employer going to its EAP and asking how it handles domestic violence issues, we want to engage all EAPs in a broader sense,” says Kim Wells, the alliance’s executive director.

Trained mental health professionals don't necessarily have specific training on domestic violence issues, she says.

"For example, someone might suggest couples counseling, and that's not necessarily a good idea for someone in a domestic violence situation, who could be in danger," Wells says.

It's essential that EAP staff and employers recognize the warning signs that an employee is a victim of domestic violence, says Dr. Brigid McCaw, medical director of the family prevention program at Kaiser Permanente Northern California, a member of the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence.

From 1999 to 2003, three Kaiser employees were killed in domestic violence incidents. "The sadness and grief that their co-workers felt really led to our commitment to making this issue more visible," McCaw says.

Three years ago, Kaiser launched its Silent Witness display, a multi-panel exhibit of stories by employees who have dealt with domestic violence. The company also makes sure that its medical staff is properly trained to address potential domestic violence issues with members.

McCaw says there are four pieces to this program: establishing partnerships with community advocacy groups; creating a supportive environment for members to talk about their fears; having on-site response from mental health professionals; and establishing a safety plan for victims.

"This is very different than depression or chemical dependency," McCaw says. "Professionals need to be able to assess the danger of the situation."

McCaw says that Kaiser's EAPs are well-versed in these issues, but she has had discussions with employers who are concerned that their EAPs are not. "There are a lot of EAP clinicians for whom this is foreign and they aren't sure what to do," she says.

Employers should also provide guidance to their own staff, as well as make sure their EAPs understand how to handle a domestic violence situation, says David Pawlowski, a clinician who handles domestic violence issues at ComPsych, a Chicago-based EAP.

"Employers have to be proactive in terms of educating staff at all levels, from human resources to management," he says. "Everyone at the company needs to be aware of the problem."

For its staff members who take calls from employees, ComPsych has specific training on how to identify and handle potential issues of domestic violence, Pawlowski says.

"You need to ask if the caller feels like they are unsafe or if things ever get violent," he says. "If you don't ask, they won't come forward with the information."

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