

Kennebec Journal Morning Sentinel (Augusta, ME)

Friday, December 8, 2006

Domestic Violence Victims May Find Help in Workplace

By Edward D. Murphy

When Lindsay Wilkins was clearing out messages on a Gorham Savings Bank cell phone that a female employee had used, she came across one from the woman's husband that was "vulgar and threatening."

She did what most people would do.

"I almost immediately deleted it and pretended I never heard that message," said Wilkins, a systems coordinator in the bank's Information Services department. But after going through a training session on domestic violence, Wilkins said she would take the more difficult route if confronted with the same situation again.

"The biggest reason why I attended the class was because of how I reacted to it," Wilkins said of the voice mail message. "Now I know it's OK to just ask someone if they're all right."

Wilkins' new approach is just what Ellen Ridley of Family Crisis Services is looking for.

Ridley is trying to get employers to recognize that domestic violence may occur mostly behind closed doors at home, but it's a problem that follows both the abused and abuser into the office. That can mean diminished productivity, difficult relationships with co-workers and a heightened risk of violent acts in the workplace.

"Most employers either don't realize they have a problem or they don't know who to call," Ridley said, explaining why she's trying to encourage other employers to join companies like Gorham Savings in offering training for handling domestic abuse issues in the workplace.

State-financed studies spell out some of the work-related side effects of domestic violence.

Nearly all victims of domestic violence say they have difficulty concentrating on work or felt they couldn't do a good job because of abuse at home. More than three out of four

said that they've been late for work because of abuse or their abuser showed up where the victim works. Three out of five said they either quit or were fired from their jobs because of problems related to the abuse.

Even worse, 47 percent said they were assaulted before going to work and 13 percent said they were assaulted at work.

Despite that last statistic, Ridley said for most victims, work is one of the only places where a victim can safely seek help and employers need to assist them. That's why it's important that other employees and the company let the victim know that they are ready to help, which is a key focus of the training, Ridley said.

Ridley provided two three-hour sessions on confronting domestic abuse for Gorham Savings' employees this week. About 20 employees volunteered for the training and will become "responders" in their individual offices for those who are being abused, said Lisa Cormier, Gorham Savings' director of human resources.

The bank has developed a procedure for responders and other employees to follow that includes definitions of abuse, where assistance can be found and how to make the workplace safe. Other forms of assistance, like unemployment for those who lose their jobs as a result of abuse-related issues, are also covered, Ridley said.

A companion study to the work impact of domestic violence for victims found that 78 percent of abusers used company resources – a phone, computer, or company vehicle – to contact a victim, whether to express remorse or engage in more harassment.

Ridley said she once interviewed an abuser who was arrested three times – including once in a company car and another time at a worksite – and was never told his job was in jeopardy.

Those situations raise liability concerns, she noted, providing another incentive for companies to develop policies covering domestic abuse.

Beyond that, it's the right thing to do and pays off in the long run, Cormier said.

"We have compassion for our employees and we want them to be safe," she said. "If we just focus on what happens inside these four walls and are missing the other piece, sometimes people will bring those problems into work with them."

On the other hand, an employee who has received help at work, she said, "saves money. They're here, they're productive, they're not depressed." Tim Parker, the manager of corporate security for L.L. Bean, said that has been his company's experience since they set up a policy that encourages people to come forward in cases of abuse.

He said Bean not only provides employee assistance programs for victims, he'll also sit down with them and go over a personal safety plan that covers everything from having a

cell phone to getting to and from a car safely and how to avoid confrontations with an abuser. But the first step remains the hardest, Parker added.

“It’s really tricky, because unless someone sees the potential for someone getting hurt, the likelihood of them bringing it forward isn’t very high because people think of it as a personal issue,” he said.

But, Parker added, “sometimes it’s as simple as people realizing that we support them.”

Copyright © 2006 Blethen Maine Newspapers, Inc.