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Domestic violence hurts workplaces, too

Advocates try to raise awareness among corporate executives

By S.A. Reid

Atlanta – The staggering costs in decreased productivity and higher employee turnover, legal liability and threats to safety associated with domestic violence have some companies doing what they can to better protect lives and their bottom lines.

Domestic violence is responsible for at least 8 million missed workdays a year and \$8.3 billion in annual costs to businesses, experts say. It has claimed the lives of at least two metro Atlantans in the past year at their workplaces — Kendra Mason, outside Greenbriar Mall, and Omni Hotel worker Clara Riddles at CNN Center.

A number of employers believe if they get rid of the employee grappling with domestic violence they will get rid of the problem, said Cathy Willis Spraez, president and chief executive of Atlanta's Partnership Against Domestic Violence. Implementing policies and practices that keep their employees safe and providing support is the better approach, Spraez said.

The partnership is hoping to get more businesses on board with that idea.

“Women make up more than 50 percent of the work force. The problem is not going to go away,” said Spraez, whose nonprofit organization provides a range of services in metro Atlanta to battered women and their children. “There are a lot of things companies can do. Some are rather sophisticated. Some are simple.”

For a sixth consecutive year, the PADV is offering its “When Domestic Violence Goes to Work” conference to teach employers how to be more proactive in dealing with what has become one of the leading causes of death for women in the workplace.

PADV's one-day conference offers expert advice to businesses on how to create a safer workplace, develop a domestic violence policy or early intervention strategy, and when to involve law enforcement. The agenda includes a session dubbed “Do the Right Thing,”

a theatrical, case study examination of how to sensitively handle domestic violence in the workplace.

Attendees also will hear from Dora Ward, a domestic violence survivor who said she is appreciative of how her immediate supervisor handled her situation two years ago. “She was supportive in helping me deal with a potential of a threat,” Ward said. “The way in which she responded really helped me return to productivity very quickly.”

Other companies have been slower to respond.

Roadblocks include a perception that domestic violence is a private family matter or one to be addressed as part of a company’s overall policy against violence in the workplace, if a company has one, experts said.

A recent survey of CEOs and employees at 1,500 of the nation’s largest companies by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence offers some clues about the role that perception plays. The Bloomington, Ill.-based organization is considered one of the leading resources on the issue.

While the majority of those polled recognize the harm domestic violence does to productivity and the bottom line, few executives think their companies should address the issue head on and tend to consider the problem significantly less pervasive than do their employees, the survey said. Most said their companies offer domestic-violence-related programs and services, but admitted less than half their employees are aware of them.

Conferences like PADV’s give employers the tools to tackle domestic violence in the workplace, said Kim Wells, the Corporate Alliance’s executive director. “People just don’t have it on their radar,” she said. “It’s just being better informed and better educated. Whether or not you know it, it’s there.”

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

- Percentage who say domestic violence hurts the bottom line: Executives, 43%; employees, 91%
- Percentage who believe their companies should address the problem: Executives, 13%; employees, 84%
- Estimate of number of their full-time workers who are victims or survivors of domestic abuse: Executives, 6%; employees, 18%
- Percentage of women employees who identify themselves as a victim or survivor of domestic violence: 26%
- Percentage of employees who report having worked with a co-worker who was a victim: 22%

Source: Corporate Leaders and America’s Workforce on Domestic Violence Survey (2007)

HOW TO GO

The “When Domestic Violence Goes to Work” conference is scheduled for 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Thursday at the Loudermilk Center, 40 Courtland St. in downtown Atlanta. To register or for more information, call 404-870-9605.

FIVE THINGS COMPANIES CAN DO

- Establish employee policies that support victims of domestic violence
- Ensure employee assistance programs are responsive to victims of domestic violence
- Educate employees about domestic violence
- Create a safe and open environment
- Increase safety at the workplace

Source: Partnership Against Domestic Violence

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