

Record Searchlight (Redding, CA)

April 25, 2006

Firms Fight Back When Domestic Violence Bleeds into Workplace

By Mary Deibel

When Maureen Valdez's romance with a co-worker went wrong, he smashed her car headlights in the company parking lot and told colleagues he would kill her.

Instead of getting her employer's help, Valdez's boss at an Oregon construction company fired her. Valdez sued, alleging job discrimination.

But she did live to tell of her abuse.

Teresa Duran didn't. The Northridge, Calif., mother of two and 24-year employee with audio-technology firm Harman International was on her way home from work when her former husband ambushed and killed her.

Her 2001 murder did more than lead to her ex-husband's conviction.

It prompted fellow employees led by company founder Sidney Harman to work with the Family Violence Prevention Fund to develop a program to strengthen security protections and provide domestic-abuse training for its 3,700 workers throughout the United States, including new hires as they join the company.

"We know firsthand that domestic violence can have a devastating impact on the workplace; we also know that it is in the interest of all employers to provide support, not obstacles, to employees threatened by domestic violence," Harman said.

Domestic violence costs U.S. businesses as much as \$5 billion a year in medical bills and sick days, the Bureau of National Affairs estimates.

And that tally doesn't include productivity losses and leave time that the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention puts at 8 million days a year of paid work, said Kim Wells, executive director of the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence.

The alliance, based in Bloomington, Ill., is made up of more than 120 Fortune 500 companies, including Allstate, American Express, Cigna, Liz Claiborne Inc., Kaiser Permanente, Mary Kay

and Verizon Wireless, that have put anti-violence programs in place at work in the knowledge that “domestic abuse bleeds into the workplace.”

“Absenteeism, presenteeism, the health-care costs are all part of it for employers, but these firms know that it’s so much smarter to be preventive and let their employees know that help is there for them in the form of employee-assistance programs, leave policies and job security,” Wells said.

She added that employers who don’t think domestic violence affects their bottom line should consider:

- ▶ That 21 percent of full-time workers surveyed for the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence said they personally are or had been victims of partner violence.
- ▶ That 38 percent said they fear for their safety at work because of a domestic-abuse situation involving themselves or a co-worker.
- ▶ That 31 percent report covering for a colleague who suffered domestic abuse.

Apparel maker Liz Claiborne Inc., which has made domestic-abuse issues a corporate cause since 1991, has commissioned handbooks on partner and teen date abuse that are posted online at its www.loveisnotabuse.com Web site.

The company also maintains a domestic-abuse program for its 17,000 employees.

“We aren’t counselors ourselves; our responsibility is to maintain a safe work environment and get expert help to victims of partner violence when it’s often a life-or-death situation,” Claiborne vice president Jane Randel said.

“People see domestic abuse as a private matter, but it’s not, and employers need to acknowledge it’s no different than providing help for psychiatric, alcohol and drug problems typically covered by employee-assistance programs,” she said.

“Employer programs needn’t be costly and can be as simple as mailroom and restroom posters and calling cards with abuse-hotline, emergency-shelter and other referral numbers that employees can take note of privately without going to or through a supervisor.”

It was life-and-death to Kathy Evsich in 1999 when she was fired not once but twice by employers who wouldn’t tolerate her estranged husband’s constant harassment. She applied for unemployment insurance but was rejected because North Carolina, where she lived at the time, didn’t pay unemployment benefits to fired workers back then.

“Businesses have to realize that a victim is working so that she can get out of the home ... and get free from the situation,” said Evsich, a mother of two who eventually remarried and became vice president of Women Against Domestic Violence, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., victim-outreach group.

Times change, and so has the law. North Carolina is now one of 10 states to prohibit job discrimination against domestic-violence victims in at least some circumstances, one of 27 states and the District of Columbia to permit unemployment benefits for abuse victims and one of six states to allow “reasonable” unpaid leave to deal with problems arising from domestic abuse, according to Legal Momentum, the former NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund.

On Jan. 5, 2006, President Bush signed the Violence Against Women Act-2005, which provides enhanced housing protections and crisis services for domestic-violence victims and their children and creates a corporate best-practices clearinghouse.

Now states, cities and corporate and nonprofit groups are waiting on Congress and the president to make good on the \$3.9 billion a year that VAWA-2005 authorizes, including grant money to operate state and local anti-violence programs.

Bush budgets since 2001 have under-funded the old law’s provisions, and the Bush 2007 budget requests only \$546 million of the \$1 billion in new program money that VAWA-2005 authorizes for each of the next five years.

But full funding is “critical,” said Esta Soler, president of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, the 20-year-old San Francisco nonprofit that helped Harman International design its pioneering program.

As for fired abuse victim Valdez, her lawsuit ended in an out-of-court settlement with her former employer. Terms of the settlement are confidential, said attorney Deborah Widiss with Legal Momentum, which handled the case.

Copyright © 2006 Redding.