

# Office Awareness Can Head Off Abuse at Home

By Amy Joyce, Washington Post Staff Writer

Melissa began to take sick days from her job at State Farm several years ago because of her abusive husband. There were “a lot of late nights where I had gotten beat up and didn’t want to go in front of everybody at work,” she said. “I tried to leave a couple times at the beginning, but I had no family around here and not many friends. I didn’t have resources, so I felt trapped.”

Then one day, her manager pulled her aside, saying she seemed inattentive and absent a lot. She broke down and told him about her situation. Later that day, her manager had a list of places she could call to report the incidents and get help.

Of the 1.7 million incidents of workplace violence in the United States every year, 18,700 are related to domestic violence, the Justice Department said. The victims in the majority of cases are women and the abusers current or former boyfriends or husbands.

Few companies have formal programs to help victims of domestic violence, although more are seeking information on how to create them, said Kim Wells, executive director of the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence.

These kinds of programs can help support employees. Further, companies can be held liable for not responding to domestic violence properly, said Stacy Dougan, an Atlanta lawyer who advises companies on domestic violence policies.

“Just like anyone, your life doesn’t stop at the door when you come to work,” Wells said. “Just like if you’re ill or have a child care issue that comes with you to work, domestic violence comes with you to work.”

Liz Claiborne, Kaiser Permanente, State Farm Insurance and Verizon Wireless are among the companies that have instituted domestic violence policies. They have helped women (and men) find refuge in hotels, relocate to different offices and get restraining orders.

A major component is education.

In a company-wide survey last year, Liz Claiborne found that 23 percent of its employees had been victims of domestic violence.

The company has a poster in every bathroom with numbers for a national domestic abuse hotline and the company's Employee Assistance Program. Employees get wallet cards with the signs of domestic abuse and receive e-mails and quizzes about those signs.

Verizon Wireless has held voluntary sessions for employees on signs of domestic abuse. It recently partnered with the Virginia attorney general to roll out a poster campaign with signs of verbal, physical and emotional violence. The posters will go out to businesses throughout the region, including Verizon Wireless stores and workplaces.

Companies that include domestic violence prevention and protection in their policies believe they have saved both lives and money. "The same way companies deal with alcoholism and drug abuse, there is no reason they shouldn't be willing to take this on as well," said Jane Randel, who spearheaded Liz Claiborne's domestic violence program. "It impacts absenteeism, drives up health-care costs, impacts productivity."

The more a company does in the way of domestic violence prevention and protection, the more likely employees will come forward when they have a problem, Wells said.

"You have a chance to respond in the scope of the workplace and get them resources. You need to have a message from as high a level as possible that this is a commitment we have," Wells said.

Kaiser Permanente started its domestic abuse program partly because it so often helped patients with similar issues, said Brigid McCaw, director of Kaiser's Family Violence Prevention Program. The company has a Web site that includes stories from employees who have survived domestic violence. It is part education, part victim support.

One Kaiser employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity because a relative works for the company and she doesn't want his co-workers to know, began to be abused by her alcoholic husband in early 2003. He would rant at her into the early morning hours, chase her to work and threaten her. She confided in the facilities director. "He sat me down and offered me his help," and sent her to the EAP. Her counselors spoke with her manager so days off could not be held against her. She was able to divorce her husband and, with the help of Kaiser, take computer classes and get promoted. She is now a manager.

In addition to educating employees, companies need to keep them safe. In March 2003, an employee's husband was sent away from a Liz Claiborne distribution center because he didn't have security clearance. He returned with a gun. The company's security team got local police involved and locked down the facility, and after a standoff the husband was caught. The company's security practices may have saved lives that day, said Mark Couch, a Claiborne human resources director.

In 2005, 28 percent of reported threats at State Farm were domestic-related. "These are only the ones that are reported. My gut tells me we're only seeing about a third," said Steve Heldstab, a security specialist with State Farm. "Most victims are ashamed."

In the case of Melissa, she called one of the community groups her boss at State Farm recommended and moved out of her house.

She also gave the company a picture of her husband so the guards could watch for him. The company made sure she had an escort to and from her car. Melissa is now happily remarried and still working for State Farm. Melissa spoke on the condition that her last name not be used because her ex-husband is still angry.

“It was just good having a boss over me that was compassionate and understood,” she said. She still tells this manager that he saved her life – something that she truly believes.

## RELATED INFORMATION

### **Laws on Domestic Abuse**

States and jurisdictions have implemented laws to protect the employment of victims of domestic abuse. For a full list, go to <http://www.legalmomentum.org/map>. More on employment rights can be found here.

Locally:

- In Maryland and Virginia, an employee who is the victim of a crime cannot be punished by an employer for taking time off to attend criminal court. Taking time off to obtain a civil protective order does not qualify.
- Maryland requires state agencies to develop domestic violence policies.
- The District includes domestic violence as a reason for unemployment insurance.

Nationally:

- Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) introduced a bill last month that would require employers to offer unpaid leave to employees seeking legal protection from abusers. It also would make domestic-violence victims eligible for unemployment benefits if they quit their jobs to get away from abusers.

Twenty-two states do not include domestic violence as a reason for unemployment insurance.

### **Model Policies**

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/04/AR2007050402658.html>

Kim Wells, executive director of the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, called Liz Claiborne “the gold standard” in terms of its domestic violence prevention policies.

The company assists victims by:

- Developing a safety plan for the workplace.
- Assigning special parking spaces.
- Screening telephone calls.
- Relocating an associate's workplace.
- Arranging for flexible hours and short-term leaves with the guarantee, in most cases, of a position upon return.
- Changing benefits to the victim's own name.
- Guaranteeing that communication with human resources and corporate security would be kept confidential to the fullest extent possible.
- Pledging to not "discriminate against domestic violence victims or associates perceived as domestic violence victims in hiring, firing, staffing or other terms, conditions or privileges of employment."

Signs an employee may be a victim of domestic violence:

- Obvious injuries.
- Increase in absences or tardiness.
- Poor concentration or inconsistent work.
- High anxiety and/or fearfulness.
- Receiving an unusual number of calls, faxes or e-mails from a partner.

Resources: National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233

SOURCE: Liz Claiborne

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/05/AR2007050500019.html?referrer=email>

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