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Oregon Workplace Law Eases Plight of Abused

By Anne Saker, The Oregonian

Every day, thousands of people head off to their jobs trailing a long, ugly shadow. They try to hide or paper over it, but it sneaks through with incessant phone calls, stalking and threats. And it affects the bottom line of businesses in every industry.

Domestic violence, after all, goes to work, too.

On Tuesday, Oregon issued rules to help businesses comply with a new law requiring employers to grant unpaid leave to workers who need the time to seek legal help, pursue a court order or move out of a home to get away from a violent partner.

The rules come six months after the Legislature passed the leave bill, making Oregon only the ninth state with such a measure. Gov. Ted Kulongoski quickly signed it and made it effective immediately, and he has since directed state agencies to establish domestic-violence policies by February.

The law applies to the nearly 37,000 businesses in Oregon with more than six employees and the countless workers with abusive partners.

Remarkably, there was little notice of the bill in the business community, which offered no opposition. The Portland Business Alliance, the city's 1,300-member chamber of commerce, did not even list the bill on its agenda for the 2007 session. Associated Oregon Industries, the major business lobby in Salem, officially was neutral on the bill.

The bill's chief sponsor, Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson of Gresham, says an April 2 murder-suicide at the University of Washington probably fueled the legislation's easy passage.

Rebecca Griego, 26, was fatally shot in her UW office by an ex-boyfriend who killed himself. She had moved away from the man and had taken out a court order against him but had told co-workers that he could still find her at work.

The phenomenon of domestic violence on the job affects women far more than men. The state's Bureau of Labor and Industries estimates that 70 percent of women with abusive partners are going to work every day.

The Department of Justice reports that in 2005, the most recent year for which data are available, there were 10,332 arrests in Oregon for various domestic-violence offenses. In 2006, Oregonians filed for 12,020 restraining orders

But the domestic violence that goes to work largely isn't physical. It's intense daily psychological torment, says Nancy Glass, a social researcher at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. Glass, who once worked as a nurse at Oregon Health & Science University, is wrapping up a four-year Oregon study about domestic violence on the job.

"One woman was telling me that her partner wouldn't let her drive herself to work," Glass says. "Sometimes he would not take her right to work. One day he took her to a river, opened up the truck and pulled out cement blocks. He told her, 'No one will ever find your body.'" After an hour, he drove the woman to work.

Another woman told of receiving 81 phone calls from her partner at work. Others told of partners who refused to care for children, forcing the women to call in sick or even quit.

For many women in abusive relationships, Glass says, the workplace can be a sanctuary. But the external distractions also can put their jobs in danger, she says. The women told her the possibility of taking time off from work could help them salvage their jobs.

When the domestic-violence leave bill came before a state House committee in May, the only business manager to testify was Robert Quesnel, who runs the Oregon operation for American Family Insurance.

Quesnel (pronounced kin-NELL), active for years in fighting domestic violence, is president of the board for Raphael House, a Portland sanctuary for battered women. He testified, he says, to convey how domestic violence affects the bottom line.

"It certainly changes productivity," he says. "It changes how people do their jobs – not just the survivor, but the people who work around her.

"In my line of work, things have to happen right away. Our customers are expecting us to act quickly. When we need to be settling claims, we can't be missing someone. So this law will only make our business better."

The state labor agency estimates that domestic violence costs Oregon businesses at least \$50 million a year, including \$9.3 million in lost productivity.

"I'm not a big fan of the government telling me what to do," Quesnel says. "But in dollars and cents, it makes sense to do this. Not to mention that it's the right thing to do."

Most business managers, though, are naive about the problem, Quesnel says.

"Most of them believe, like we all do, that it doesn't happen where they are," he says. "Once you start talking to them about the odds, and you're doing the numbers, and you

tell them that there's a 1-in-7 chance of this happening in your workplace, they see the financial impact. All of a sudden, the discussion changes to, 'I wonder if that's what was going on with so-and-so.'"

Quesnel says his company has long granted unpaid leave to employees with domestic-violence problems and, "I don't even know who takes it," he says. "That's between the employee and her manager. She shouldn't have to come all the way to the boss to explain why she needs time."

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