

Arizona Republic

October 26, 2004 Tuesday

When Abuse Affects Work; Businesses Taking Steps to Halt Domestic Violence

By Christine L. Romero, The Arizona Republic

Many people think the physical and emotional battles of domestic violence occur only at home; longtime business managers know better.

Valley businesspeople have seen the effects of domestic violence in many forms. With some victims, there is high absenteeism. Others may not be able to concentrate on their work because of an endless stream of abusive phone calls. In more-extreme cases, the victim and her co-workers may be endangered by a violent family member who follows the victim to work.

John Rogers, a first vice president at Bank One Arizona, says that more than once his company has resorted to transferring employees to other bank branches to try to shield them from their abusers.

Rogers said it isn't always obvious an employee is being abused.

"It's one of those problems that's out there, but you don't know who," Rogers said. "It's one of those problems that people keep very quiet."

What is obvious is the cost that domestic violence imposes on companies.

Employers nationwide pay an estimated \$10 billion annually for medical expenses related to domestic violence and an additional \$100 million in the form of sick pay and lost productivity, according to the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

The problem may be especially bad for Arizona companies; studies suggest the state has a higher rate of domestic violence than the nation as a whole. An estimated one in three Arizona women will face some sort of domestic violence, compared with one in four nationwide, according to the anti-violence coalition.

Most statistics focus on female victims, but experts quickly point out that domestic violence doesn't discriminate. Men can be battered by their wives, children or other family members. Domestic violence also occurs in same-sex partnerships. It's also not necessarily physical. Emotional- and financial-control issues can be considered forms of domestic violence.

Rogers of Bank One says he has seen victims who have to ask their abuser's permission to stay late at work or to attend a company meeting. Such control hurts employees personally and can deeply bruise a victim's job performance.

While companies such as Bank One, with many different offices, have the ability to move workers around, that isn't the case for many employers.

Even when a move is possible, it doesn't always help, Rogers said. The bank cannot effectively "hide" employees from partners with whom they live. That makes other steps to help victims and prevent violence highly important, Rogers said.

All employers, regardless of size, can take steps to help prevent losses to the bottom line while helping employees stay safe, said JoEllen Lynn, manager of community affairs at American Express' north Phoenix office and co-chair of Employers Against Domestic Violence, a public-private partnership. Those steps include:

- Provide awareness training about domestic violence to help managers and co-workers learn sensitivity to the issue.
- Post information about domestic-violence resources and hotlines in public areas and private areas, such as restrooms. In its restrooms, Bank One offers "shoe cards" that list domestic-violence hotlines and resources and are small enough to be hidden from an abuser in a shoe.
- Give security staff a photograph of the abuser and a copy of a legal-protection order if there is one. Security also should be made available to escort employees to their cars.
- Mandate that all employees report violent incidents that occur at work.
- Punish abusers who use their company phones, faxes and e-mail to harass their victims.
- If a violent situation breaks out and cannot be controlled, employers should call police immediately.

It's important to make victims feel supported if they talk about their problems with a manager or co-worker, Lynn said.

Confidentiality and reassuring the victim are key.

Managers need training to spot the signs of domestic violence. Lynn said some of the more prevalent signs include lack of concentration, increased personal phone calls that are highly emotional, withdrawal from normal office conversations or activities, bruises or other unexplained injuries and unexplained missed days.

Managers also should pay attention to people who ask for help for a "friend," because they sometimes are asking for themselves.

Domestic-violence victims frequently say they fear losing their jobs and missing out on promotions because of their problems at home, Lynn said.

“That’s pretty alarming,” she said.

The cycle of violence extends to children. Lynn said about six out of 10 children living with domestic violence end up being victims themselves.

The most important thing to remember, Lynn said, is that every person and situation is different. That means employers need to understand that the best approach when trying to help domestic-violence victims often varies.

Her company, American Express, tries to embrace this.

“We don’t do everything vanilla,” Lynn said. “We look at every situation differently.”

Help for employers

Large companies often have internal resources and funding to deal with workplace violence. But there are several domestic-violence resource groups that can help small and medium-sized companies. Here are a few suggestions:

- Employers Against Domestic Violence, part of the Maricopa Association of Governments: www.mag.Maricopa.gov/archive/DV, (602) 254-6300.
- Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.azacadv.org, (602) 279-2900.
- Arizona is one of several states with laws aimed at helping victims on the job. The state allows an employer to petition for an injunction prohibiting workplace harassment, because abusers often target their victims on the job.

Help for victims

- If you are being hurt or threatened by someone close to you and you need to talk, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
- For assistance in finding Arizona domestic-violence shelters or services, call the Community Information & Referral’s CONTACTS 24-hour hotline at (602) 263-8900 or 1-800-235-9678 if outside Maricopa County.

Reach the reporter at christine.romero@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-8285.

Copyright © 2004 The Arizona Republic.