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M A N A G E M E N T



EAP's Domestic Violence Role

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One MBHO/EAP teamed up with a major telecommunications provider to address the problem through the workplace **BY CHARLIE BOWMAN, MS, LCSW, LMFT, AND RICH PAUL, MSW, CEAP**

Francesia La Rose's family filed a wrongful death action against her employer on the basis that the company had failed to protect her adequately. La Rose's former boyfriend called her supervisor and said that if she was not fired, he would come to the office to kill her. The next day, after the supervisor refused to fire her, the ex-boyfriend arrived at the building where La Rose worked, walked past the security guard—who allegedly had pictures of the former boyfriend—and shot and killed her. La Rose previously had notified her employer of her protective order against the former boyfriend and of her concern that he would follow through with his threats.

This story illustrates the human and business costs associated with domestic violence, as well as the complexity of addressing it. It is important to reduce the potential of a serious, violent incident at the workplace and to help victims and abusers stop the cycle of violence in their lives.

The Pervasiveness of Domestic Violence

Although statistics on domestic violence are not precise because of underreporting, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of women, children, and men are abused by family members or intimate partners each year. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that 700,000 incidents of domestic violence occurred in 2001, the most recent data available.

Reports from police records, victim services, and academic studies show that domestic violence exists in every socioeconomic group, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, gender, religion, education, income level, or culture. Violence can occur in married, cohabitating, and dating relationships. Studies show equivalent rates of domestic violence among all cultural



groups. In other words, abusers and their victims reflect our society's spectrum of socioeconomic and cultural groups.

Domestic Violence at Work

Domestic violence does not stay home when its victims or perpetrators go to work. It can—and does—spill over into the workplace and become disruptive to the work environment. The effects of domestic violence are associated with many direct and indirect costs to the employer, such as decreased productivity and increased healthcare costs, absenteeism, errors, employee turnover, time spent coping with problems, and acts of physical violence in the workplace. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, homicide by domestic partners is by far the most frequent manner in which women are fatally injured in the workplace, and domestic violence accounts for 27% of all incidents of violence in the workplace.

The spillover of domestic violence from the home into the workplace threatens the safety

of all employees. Many times a perpetrator who commits acts of domestic violence in the workplace does so indiscriminately. Out of fear for their own safety, coworkers may refuse to work in physical proximity to the victim, resulting in additional direct and indirect costs to the employer. Unfortunately, in a number of cases, a victim is terminated in an effort to eliminate the threat to coworkers, as well as reduce the employer's potential liability.

Because victims often are distracted and emotionally drained, they are at higher risk for accidents and overall diminished productivity. In response to a 1997 national poll, 37% of the women who reported experiencing domestic violence also reported an impact on their work performance: 24% reported that abuse caused them to be late or to miss work, 20% reported an impact on career advancement, and 15% reported job loss.¹ The bottom line is that domestic violence costs employers an estimated \$3 to \$5 billion annually in increased healthcare

costs, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and related security costs.²

More and more, businesses and unions are realizing the heavy toll that domestic violence takes in terms of productivity, morale, and creativity. In response to these critical issues, a number of organizations have implemented workplace-based domestic violence prevention programs. In addition to the value this type of program brings to adults and children victimized by domestic violence, it also makes good business sense. Fortunately, developing and implementing a workplace violence prevention program is not as complex as it may sound, particularly when an organization leverages its EAP to support this initiative.

What EAPs Can Do

EAPs' role in preventing domestic violence includes offering a comprehensive consultation to the organization on how best to design and implement an effective workplace program, defining the scope of services available to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, and reassuring them that help is available. EAPs should have specific training in the area of abuse, and the services related to addressing domestic violence should be strongly promoted. EAP counselors can help to resolve issues affecting employee health and well-being by providing comprehensive assessments, conducting short-term counseling, referring members to appropriate treatment when necessary, and providing follow-up services.

EAPs can work with managers to create, before a crisis occurs, a list of resources and response strategies. In addition, they should consult with organizations on creating policy statements regarding domestic violence similar to those issued regarding sexual harassment. Education is another important job of the EAP. Domestic violence awareness training should be conducted for employees and managers and offer information on local resources; supervisors need to be able to recognize signs of domestic violence and understand what action they should take when an employee is in an abusive relationship.

For EAPs, our primary goal is to conduct a thorough assessment that ensures we are

identifying victims of domestic violence and then linking those individuals to counseling resources. Focus is on a strong assessment that uncovers any warning signs of domestic violence and once identified, providing motivational counseling and encouragement to link the victim with a safety plan and appropriate counseling resources.

One EAP's Initiative

To raise awareness among its employer clients about the impact of domestic violence on the workplace and productivity, Value Options (a national provider of managed behavioral health and EAP services) launched a comprehensive domestic violence prevention initiative for employers in January 2005. The initiative is aimed at guiding employers through the construction and development of a domestic violence prevention and response program, and it provides the tools and resources employers need to accomplish this.

The materials and consultation that Value Options provides includes a presentation to enlist senior management support, suggestions for building a cross-functional workgroup, sample policies, and guidance in crafting a communication strategy. Tools include work-site training sessions, articles, tip sheets, posters, intranet graphics, sample e-mail messages, and a sample timeline. The program also includes special training for EAPs to raise awareness of domestic violence when they conduct detailed assessments, facilitate linkages with available resources, and provide counseling and support. As a public service, the materials are available to employers and the EAP community at www.valueoptions.com/clients/prevention.htm.

Verizon Communications supported Value Options in this initiative. Verizon served as a corporate model in that it had implemented a program successfully to address domestic violence in the workplace (strong attendance at awareness seminars, participation across all levels of the business, and widespread support within the organization are some of the indicators of a highly successful program). Executives recognized that the organization could influence employees' lives and that their efforts could affect the bottom line. Verizon's program consisted of a comprehensive

approach that included, but was not limited to, employee and manager trainings, company-wide communications, revised policies and procedures regarding domestic violence, and a relocation program.

What Organizations Can Do

The organizational champion for this cause must first enlist senior-management support. With senior leadership support the initiative takes on a more prominent role within the organization and creates cooperation from all levels.

Another cornerstone to the success of the domestic violence prevention initiative is the formation of an interdisciplinary workgroup at the outset. The function of this group is not only to create a domestic violence prevention program for the organization, but also to meet regularly to continuously evaluate the program, identify trends, and enhance and refine the program. This group should craft a domestic violence prevention program that includes a statement of purpose, workforce demographics, metrics and evaluation methods, communication objectives, and key messages.

With a strong foundation of commitment, data, clear objectives, and a robust communication strategy, an organization can take action to establish a safe workplace. The following are examples of what employers can do to address domestic violence:

- If one does not already exist, establish an EAP.
- Support and encourage the use of the company's EAP.
- Establish, reinforce, and communicate sound workplace policies that address violence-at-work issues.
- Develop business practices that support victims and their children (e.g., flextime, temporary leave, job transfers, employee confidentiality, orders of protection help).
- Provide educational training about domestic violence for employees, supervisors, and managers.
- Hang posters and/or distribute brochures about domestic violence in break rooms and other places where employees congregate.
- Post or distribute resource information; be sure to include the EAP's information.
- Invite EAP and local domestic violence resources to set up an informational table at the

next employee safety, health, and/or benefits fair.

- Invite EAP and local service providers to present lunchtime talks about domestic violence, conflict resolution, and other related topics.
- Publish educational information on domestic violence on the company's intranet and in the company's newsletter.
- Join together with other companies, service providers, and governmental agencies to build collaborative partnerships aimed at creating safe and supportive work environments.
- Develop workplace-safety plans and threat-management response teams with cross-sectional representation of the organization, including EAP, safety, HR, union, etc.
- Provide comprehensive healthcare, including adequate mental health benefits.

Conclusion

Each "minor" incident of domestic violence carries with it the potential for a more serious event. Employers have a unique opportunity to prevent the potential of domestic violence from spilling over into the workplace, as well as to provide tools and resources to employees that can help end the epidemic of violence in America's homes. Too many people believe that domestic violence is a private matter between partners rather than a criminal offense that affects not only the workplace but the larger community and merits a strong and swift response. Companies should consider leveraging their EAP as a partner in addressing this critical issue through various organizational and individual interventions. Silence is the batterer's best friend. An

organization's efforts to break the silence can make all the difference. **BHM**

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