

Not Just a Domestic Problem

Intimate Partner Violence

Anne Doherty

News of workplace violence brings to mind attacks by angry customers or fellow workers, but each year an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 reported cases of workplace violence in the US are caused by domestic partners, according to the Verizon Foundation.

The scope of the problem

Intimate partner violence (IPV, also called domestic violence or abuse) includes not only physical abuse but also sexual, mental, and emotional abuse as well as stalking and economic control. It is a serious public health concern that has been strongly correlated with physical and mental health problems, child abuse and neglect, alcoholism, and homelessness.

The workplace offers a promising arena for reducing intimate partner violence, for several reasons: nearly nine in ten abused women are or have been employed; the vast majority (89 percent) of those women have been harassed in connection with their work; and there are solid ethical, business, and legal reasons for reducing IPV.

Intimate partner violence is not limited to any particular group of people, although at least 85 percent of victims are female. Three-quarters of IPV victims are white, but proportionately, IPV rates are similar among white, black, and Hispanic women. The rates in urban, suburban, and rural areas also are similar to each other. IPV is found in all socioeconomic and demographic segments, but it tends to occur more often among women with lower levels of income and education and among women 18 to 24 years old.

The cost to employees

The effects of IPV in the workplace range from decreased morale to death and include tardiness, absenteeism, lowered self-esteem, poor focus, and diminished work performance. Abused women face many barriers in maintaining employment. For example, nearly 44 percent of abused women reported that their partner left them without

transportation for work. More than half of abused women have been tardy, one-quarter have left early, and more than half have not shown up at all.

The cost to employers

Businesses pay a high price for the direct and indirect costs of intimate partner violence, especially in the service industry (the industry in which 70 percent of all workplace assaults happen). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that direct costs such as medical and mental health service claims total more than \$4 billion annually. Indirect costs, including lost wages, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and use of work time to arrange for personal services, total a loss of nearly \$1.8 billion.

Employers can also be vulnerable to lawsuits for not maintaining a safe work environment or not providing assistance, which can cost between \$25,000 and several million dollars per lawsuit. The average jury award is \$1.2 million, and the average settlement is \$600,000, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

Employers respond

Several national studies have indicated that a majority of employers consider IPV a serious safety concern that also affects profitability. More than half of employers surveyed knew of particular instances of domestic abuse among employees. Relatively few organizations, however, have policies and programs in place to address IPV in the workplace. Of those employers who have implemented prevention or assistance programs, all did so for reasons of compassion and safety, rather than simply to improve the bottom line. Some responses include having an employee assistance program and, in some states, requesting a restraining order on behalf of an employee.

Having an employee assistance program is a positive step, but has not proven sufficient to reduce intimate partner violence in the workplace. The most common reason that many abused women do not ask for help from these employer-sponsored programs is fear of losing their jobs. Training for managers and expanded company policies may be necessary to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence.

National Overview of Intimate Partner Violence

- One-third of women will experience domestic partner violence over the course of their lifetime.
- More than 5 million incidences of domestic partner violence occur annually, affecting 1.5 million women.
- Nearly 1,500 women die each year due to domestic partner violence.
- More than one-fifth of adult employees are domestic partner violence victims.

Some organizations do develop explicit safety policies and provide a safe place for abused employees to seek assistance without fear of retribution. The Multnomah County Health Department in Oregon provides a model example. It has devised a comprehensive program to address partner violence in the workplace.

The department's four-page document "General County Personnel Rules: Workplace Violence Rule 3-45" addresses partner violence in a number of ways. In addition to prohibiting violence in the workplace, the rule also outlines a reporting chain of command, forbids retaliation for reporting, mandates reasonable protection accommodations, limits information given out about the employee, and allows flexible scheduling and leave time. In the case of diminished work performance, the rule mandates evaluation of all aspects of an employee's situation and options before any disciplinary actions may be taken. The county also offers two pages of ideas and suggestions for abused employees in the "Employees Experiencing Partner Violence" section of its *Improving Response to Partner Violence* manual.

In addition to local governments, some national corporations are working to reduce IPV. Both Verizon Wireless and Macy's West have strong internal policies concerning partner violence in the workplace. Macy's West recognizes IPV as a concern for its business, since 70 percent of their employees are women. Human resource managers developed a team-based program to identify and refer employees by collaborating with the Blue Shield of California Foundation and local domestic violence service organizations.

For employers interested in learning more about addressing IPV in the workplace, many resources are available online. One nonprofit agency, the Family Violence Prevention Fund (www.endabuse.org/workplace), offers several resources for small and large employers and unions, including examples of innovative employers, educational training tips, sample texts for developing policies, and links for state and federal laws.

Employers are becoming more concerned about the serious health and financial consequences of intimate partner violence and its effects on the workplace, and recognize both compassionate and business reasons to establish prevention and assistance programs. Increased awareness and education about the issue, coupled with the examples set by large businesses such as Verizon and Macy's West and local organizations such as Multnomah County, should lead to safer and more productive workplaces. ■

Author

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National Domestic Violence Hotline, 24 hours a day.
www.ndvh.org; 800-799-7233.

For other resources related to this article, please see the online version at www.nwpublichealth.org.

Annotated Resources on Occupational Health & Safety

By Laura Larsson

Disabled Workers

CODI: Cornucopia of Disability Information. <http://codi.buffalo.edu>. CODI serves as a community resource for consumers and professionals by providing disability information in a wide variety of areas. It contains a repository of electronic disability documents dating back to the early 1990s, many of which are publicly available nowhere else on the Internet.

Emergency Medical Services Personnel

Stress Management for the Emergency Care Provider. Mikolaj, Alan. Prentice Hall, 2004.

Examines stress and critical incident stress in the emergency services professions and explores the latest in stress management techniques and the discussions and controversies in the literature.

Healthcare Workers' Ergonomics

Back Injury among Healthcare Workers: Causes, Solutions, and Impacts. William Charney and Anne Hudson (eds.). CRC Press, 2003.

www.wingusa.org/book.htm.

This book presents the latest research and information on the topic from an epidemiological, legal, and equipment manufacturing point of view. Uses case histories from a number of injured healthcare workers to analyze back injuries from the worker's point of view and gives a detailed discussion of the legal and rehabilitation pitfalls that workers face when dealing with an injury.

Pesticides and Agricultural Workers and their Families

CROETweb: Workplace Safety and Health Resources. 2004.

<http://croetweb.com/index.cfm>.

The collection of links at the Oregon Health & Science University's Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology includes occupations and industries, chemical hazards, biological hazards, ergonomics issues, and workplace safety issues.

Workplace Wellness Initiatives

Eat 5 to 9 Servings of Fruits and Vegetables A Day for Better Health.

www.5aday.gov.

One of the best sites for encouraging people to eat properly by including between five and nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day to keep healthy. Great illustrations and content containing recipes, serving portions, scientific evidence for eating fresh fruit and vegetables, and many resources.

Employer-Based Prevention of Chronic Disease in Washington State, 2005.

University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center, October 2005. http://arcnw.org/docs/re_wa_emp_05.pdf

This lengthy document will be of interest to employers, employee advocates, and employees. Includes two executive summaries, a primer on Washington State employment, sections on employment-based health promotion activities in the state, employer health risk assessment activities, Washington State employers' thoughts on employment-based health promotion activities, and a list of recommendations.

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