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Employers need to act against domestic violence

By Alana Miller

Ninety-four percent of corporate security directors rank domestic violence as a high security problem at their companies.

In the same survey, 66 percent of executives said their companies' financial performance would benefit by addressing the issue with employees.

With nearly one in three women reporting abuse at some time in their lives, domestic violence is likely to affect almost every workplace.

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that intimate partners, such as husbands, ex-husbands and current and former boyfriends, commit violent crimes against about 1 million women every year.

In Rochester last year, a death caused by domestic violence happened every six to seven weeks.

"(Victims are) anything but typical," says Cathy Mazzotta, executive director of Alternatives for Battered Women. "They can make six figures or no figures. They can be the person sitting next to you. ... They are individuals who feel trapped in a situation that is unsafe to leave. It comes to the workplace every day."

Employers should consider violence against women as a workplace issue for both ethical and bottom-line reasons.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that the annual cost of lost productivity due to domestic violence equals \$727.8 million, with more than \$7.9 million worth of paid workdays lost each year.

Nationally, health care costs for domestic violence victims are nearly \$4.1 billion.

What are signs of domestic abuse? Look for job performance problems, difficulty concentrating, lateness, missed work, excessive phone calls, physical injury, warm weather attire in hot weather, inability to work late and depression.

Local organizations can help you start a program to address domestic violence in your workplace by offering counseling services, resources and training.

ABW offers presentations and training for your company through the Rochester Workplace Initiative on Domestic Violence (www.abwrochester.org). The agency is a licensed provider of shelter with a continuum of services.

The local organization Stand Up Guys recognizes that violence against women is an issue for everyone and that men need to stand up and get involved, too (www.standupguys.org).

Annie Lane, an advisory board member, believes that "all employers should be educated on this issue. In many cases the office is the woman's only safe haven."

They suggest changing phone extensions, moving desks and alerting security to help women in crisis.

Domestic violence is a security and liability concern in the workplace.

Employers who fail to protect their employees from violence at work may be liable, with jury awards averaging \$600,000 nationwide.

"Employers can make it easier for their employees by doing things that won't cost much ... such as changing their work hours to prevent harassment on the job," says ABW's Mazzotta. "By supporting your employees, you send out the message that you care, earning you retention and loyalty."

Contact your local agencies. Create a strategic plan, written policies and procedures with a commitment to offer support and resources. Helping employees who are experiencing abuse can be a challenge for management, but a challenge worth meeting.

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