

It IS your business: Protect domestic-violence victims at work

Issue: Your role and responsibilities when it comes to domestic violence in the workplace.

Risk: Doing nothing risks lives, safety, morale, lawsuits and your bottom line.

Action: Take the steps outlined below.

Think domestic violence is too personal for you to deal with? Think again.

Each year, about 20,000 people are attacked in the workplace by current or former intimate partners, says the Justice Department. It's an epidemic that costs employers up to \$5 billion annually in lost productivity, higher health care costs and increased safety expenses.

Plus, just one domestic-violence incident can damage morale and land you in legal hot water.

Advice: Take the following preventative measures to keep your workplace safe, and to react properly if an incident occurs or is suspected:

Be proactive

1. Post information about domestic-violence resources or hotlines in public and private places. BankOne, for example, offers "shoe cards" in its restrooms that list domestic violence hotlines and are small enough to be hidden from an abuser in a shoe.
2. Conduct thorough background checks of all job candidates.
3. Mandate that all employees report violent incidents at work.

What to do after an incident

1. Refer employees who come forward to your employee assistance program or to the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800) 799-SAFE. If appropriate, suggest contacting the police.
2. Reassure the employee that help is available and that he or she doesn't deserve to be abused. Do not be judgmental.
3. Work with employees to help ensure their safety. This may include an escort to and from the building, telecommuting, a flexible schedule, a new e-mail address or phone extension, or arranging counseling. If an employee secures a legal-protection order against someone, give security staff and receptionists a photo of that person, and notify employees to report any suspicious activity.
4. Remind the employee's supervisor not to discipline the employee for performance issues related to the abuse (absenteeism, etc.).

5. Maintain confidentiality. Divulge details on a need-to-know basis.

For information, links and resources, visit www.endabuse.org or locate your state's domestic-violence coalition hotline at www.usda.gov/da/shmd/state.htm.