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WHITE PAPER: Domestic Violence as a Workplace Concern

In all countries of the world and in all socio-economic classes, women are the victims of physical and sexual violence. Domestic violence occurs behind closed doors, when women are verbally, physically and sexually abused by current or former intimate partners. According to a National Violence Against Women survey, in the United States alone, an estimated 5.3 million acts of domestic violence occur each year against women 18 and older (U.S. Centers for Disease Control). This violence results in two million injuries, more than a quarter of which require medical attention (AFSCME).

Domestic violence can take many forms. The perpetrators are usually men and the victims are mostly women. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, domestic violence acts generally fall into one or more of the following categories:

Physical Battering

The abuser's physical attacks or aggressive behavior toward his partner can range from bruising and slaps to murder. It often begins with what is excused as trivial contacts, which then escalate into more frequent and serious attacks.

Sexual Battering

Physical attack by the abuser is often accompanied by or culminates in sexual violence wherein the woman is forced to have sexual relations with her abuser.

Psychological Battering

The abuser's psychological or mental violence can include constant verbal abuse, harassment, and excessive possessiveness, isolating the woman from friends and family, depriving her of physical and economic resources, and destroying her personal property

Domestic violence is rarely an isolated incident. The abuse may start with name calling and violent behavior like punching a wall, but it usually intensifies over time. The violence can escalate with the abuser pushing or slapping his victim. It can eventually become life-threatening when the abuser chokes his victim, uses weapons and/or breaks her bones.

Workplace Impact

While it may not seem that domestic violence is a work-related issue, abuse, threats and violence often follow victims to work. According to a Family Violence Prevention Fund study, in the United States, approximately 74 percent of women who experience abuse at home also experience abuse at the workplace. Abusers harass victims at work via telephone or e-mail, or they may come into the workplace to harass or threaten their victims and their co-workers. This situation can give rise to untold financial hardships for the employer and create a dangerous workplace for the victim and her co-workers.

Domestic violence takes a huge economic toll on both the workplace and the general economy. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), domestic violence victims lose a total of nearly eight million days of paid work a year—the equivalent of more than 32,000 full-time jobs. Each year, domestic violence costs American businesses more than \$4.1 billion in health care-related services for victims and an additional \$1.8 billion in productivity losses.

Researchers have found that general costs from domestic violence in the United States range from \$10–\$67 billion per year. Domestic violence has financial ramifications for the victims as well. Domestic violence in the U.S. causes an estimated \$975 million in lost wages for victims just in days missed from work. Victims are often trapped in low paying jobs because of having to change jobs frequently. Lower productivity and absenteeism prohibits these women from receiving raises and pay increases. (*Domestic Violence Reduces Business Productivity and Profit*). In addition, respondents to a Family Violence Prevention Fund study reported that abuse also affected their ability to keep a job.

The United States is certainly not the only country whose economy suffers as a result of domestic violence. Domestic violence costs countries around the world millions, even billions, of dollars in health care, police and court costs, and lost productivity. For instance, a study conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank found that the cost of domestic violence for Canadian businesses was \$1.6 billion per year, including medical care and lost productivity. According to the Women and Equality Unit in the United Kingdom’s Department of Trade and Industry, domestic violence in the UK costs more than \$4.6 billion per year in social services, health care and lost productivity.

Domestic violence affects the bottom line in other less obvious ways as well. According to a Family Violence Prevention Fund study, domestic violence caused 56 percent of employed domestic violence victims to be late for work at least five times a month; 28 percent to leave early at least five days a month; and 54 percent to miss at least three full days of work a month.

The psychological dimension of domestic violence can also contribute to workplace losses. Violence in the Workplace, a 2005 landmark study from the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence (CAEPV), found that domestic violence has a profound impact on victims’ co-workers. Thirty-eight percent of co-workers were concerned for their own personal safety, and 30 percent noted that abusers frequently visited the office, heightening victims’ and coworkers’ sense of fear. Their fears may be well-founded, as 94 percent of U.S. corporate security directors ranked domestic violence as a high security problem at their companies (National Safe Workplace Institute Survey as cited in *Get the Facts—Domestic Violence and the Workplace*).

Aside from the psychological impact, according to the CAEPV study, 27 percent of co-workers reported “frequently to somewhat frequently” having to do the victims’ work, and 31 percent often “covered” for a victim of domestic violence, cutting down on worker productivity.

Protecting Employees

When a victim attempts to leave an abusive partner, the workplace can become the only place the assailant can locate and harm her. The U.S. Department of Justice has found that approximately 20,000 workers are threatened or attacked in the workplace every year by partners or spouses. In addition, according to the Workplace Violence Institute, homicide by intimate partners is the leading cause of workplace deaths among female employees. Not knowing the signs of domestic violence increases the risk of danger to the victim as well as to her co-workers (AFSCME).

The CAEPV’s 2005 survey found that 21 percent of those surveyed were at some point victims of domestic violence. Of those who identified as domestic violence victims, 48 percent indicated a

comprehensive work place domestic violence awareness program would have been helpful and 43 percent wished their employers offered training on domestic violence.

In the United States, businesses have an obligation to provide a safe workplace, and liability issues could arise for companies failing to protect their employees. All employees have an obligation, be it legal or moral, to intervene when one of their employees is experiencing domestic violence. Simple steps can be taken by businesses, large and small, to protect women and their co-workers, help them stay safe from violence, and find needed resources. Companies should have formal policies and domestic awareness training. The first step is for supervisors and co-workers to understand domestic violence and recognize the signs.

The workplace may be the only place a woman has sanctuary from her abuser and where she is safe to receive help and support. Supervisors and co-workers should be encouraged to keep their eyes and ears open for signs that a woman in their office may be being abused. Some warning signs include:

- Social withdrawal from co-workers.
- Bruises or physical complaints that show signs of assault (but may often be explained as being caused by accidents).
- Crying or outbursts of anger when on the phone.
- Frequent personal calls that leave her upset.
- Frequent or unexplained absences or lateness.
- Reduced productivity, decline in job performance and a lack of concentration.

Even though warning signs may be present, a victim of domestic violence is often reluctant to discuss it out of embarrassment or fear—which means the situation should be handled with extreme care. Communicate support even if the woman is not ready to discuss her abuse.

If a woman admits to being abused, a co-worker or supervisor can approach her using the following strategies, as suggested by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME):

- Believe the victim.
- Encourage her, but don't pressure her to talk about the abuse.
- Respect her need for confidentiality.
- Listen to the victim and support her feelings without judging.
- Let her know she is not alone.
- Reassure the victim that the abuse is not her fault and she is not to blame.
- Give her clear messages that she can't change her partner's behavior; apologies and promises will not end the violence; and that violence is never justifiable.
- Physical safety is the first priority. Assess the victim's physical safety, discuss the woman's options and help her make plans to ensure her safety and the safety of her children.
- Give the victim agency. Allow her the time she needs to make her own decisions.
- If she is not ready to make major changes, do not withdraw support.
- Provide the woman with a list of key community resources that support and work with victims of domestic violence.
- Encourage the victim to save any abusive e-mails or telephone messages from her partner.

Positive communication and affirmation is desirable when speaking with a domestic violence victim. Some statements and actions must be avoided, as they can be harmful and even dangerous:

- Avoid judgmental or domineering language. Don't tell the victim what to do, when to leave, or when not to leave.
- Don't tell her to go back to her abuser or to try a little harder to make the relationship work.

- Don't attempt to rescue the woman by trying to make decisions for her.
- Don't attempt to mediate the situation by offering to talk to the woman's partner to straighten things out.
- Don't advise the victim to stay in the abusive relationship because of the children.

Workplace Guidelines

In addition to creating awareness about domestic abuse and teaching employees how to recognize the signs and reach out to victims, companies should be proactive and have policies in place for dealing with domestic violence in the workplace.

These policies will communicate to workers that in addition to an awareness of and understanding about domestic violence, resources may be available to help victims. This is particularly important since many victims are reluctant to disclose their situation. Even if a woman is not ready to confide in her co-workers or supervisors, making workplace policy information available could assist her in finding help outside of the office (*Swanberg, Logan and Macke*).

The following suggestions for employers were compiled from information in Christina Morfeld's *Domestic Violence is a Workplace Problem*, AFSCME's *Unions Respond to Domestic Violence*, and Soroptimist's *Workplace Domestic Violence Guidelines*:

- Design employee assistance programs as a way to foster respect, trust and open communication.
- Have a formal domestic violence policy on file, including guidelines on confidentiality, schedule and leave flexibility, procedures that supervisors are to follow if they believe a subordinate may be a victim, steps victims should take, and available resources.
- Include information about domestic violence and the employer's response in orientations for new employees and in the organizational handbook.
- Make reasonable efforts to maintain a secure office environment.
- Support local domestic violence shelters with clothing, toys, and furniture drives or with funding as a way to raise awareness of the problem.
- Once a woman has made it known that she is a victim of domestic violence, employers can offer a number of strategies to ensure her safety:
 - Change the employee's work station and/or schedule.
 - Provide the woman with parking near the front door and an escort to walk her to and from her car.
 - Provide photos of the employee's abuser to security personnel and the receptionist.
 - Remove the woman's e-mail address and telephone extension from public directories.
 - Have another employee or third party screen the victim's telephone calls and e-mail messages.
 - Change payroll addresses, direct deposit information or beneficiaries, as needed.

A study presented at the 2006 International Work, Stress and Health Conference found that victims of domestic violence are more likely to stay employed when the workplace offers some type of support. Workplace support initiatives that include flexible working hours, supervisor-approved workload modifications, and implementation of safeguards such as the screening of telephone calls, may help victims stay employed.

Both employers and employees finally are recognizing the significance of domestic violence as a workplace concern. A 2002 Liz Claiborne, Inc, Corporate Leader Survey found that 68 percent of corporate leaders believed that a company's financial performance and productivity would benefit if domestic violence were addressed among its employees. An organization's bottom line and the emotional well-being of all employees depends on a company's willingness to create a safe and enlightened workplace.

Soroptimist Assistance

Soroptimist International of the Americas has focused on domestic violence, particularly as it affects the workplace, for many years. The *Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence* is an ongoing effort to raise awareness about domestic violence as a workplace concern. Local Soroptimist club members distribute hotline cards personalized with local contact information for domestic violence shelters and other services. Club members leave the cards in restrooms or put them in paycheck envelopes. This is a way to get information to women without requiring them to identify themselves as victims. Each year tens of thousands of domestic violence hotline cards are distributed in workplaces throughout the world. Soroptimists further customize the program for cultural relevance. In Japan, for instance, women are not likely to pick up a card in a restroom, so members place them in packages of tissues and hand them out in the street.

In addition to distributing the hotline cards, clubs also hold lectures in their workplaces to draw attention to the issue of domestic violence as a workplace concern; lobby their employers to institute policies and include domestic violence information in their personnel handbooks; and hold seminars for local businesses about the costs associated with domestic violence in the workplace.

As working women, Soroptimists understand the importance of reaching out to women in the workplace. In May 2005, Soroptimist developed comprehensive guidelines called the Soroptimist Domestic Violence Workplace Policies. Available to clubs via Soroptimist's website, the guidelines provide information and statistics about domestic violence as a workplace issue, and offer step by step instructions for implementing a domestic violence workplace policy.

In 2002, the Soroptimist Workplace Campaign to End Domestic Violence won the Associations Make a Better World Award sponsored by the American Society of Association Executives.

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