

Employers Show Strong Interest in Domestic Violence Response

More than 100 client representatives attended the recent client summit series, “Domestic Violence: Prevention at Work,” indicating that this topic really resonates with employers. According to the evaluations, attendees appreciated the expertise, professionalism and the passion of the speakers.

The teleconferences were part of a larger initiative that included consultative materials and tools for clients and additional staff and key affiliate training. ValueOptions created this program because of the tremendous toll domestic violence takes on individuals and businesses.

Speakers—Stacey Dougan and Robin Thompson with the law firm Greenberg Traurig, and Charlie Bowman, manager of Verizon’s VZ-LIFE program—discussed the impact of domestic violence on the workplace, employer responsibility, and ideas for developing an awareness and prevention program. Key points from the presentation are summarized below:

- Domestic violence is a business issue with significant costs to the bottom line in terms of medical expenses, lost wages, absenteeism and reduced productivity. When considered in addition to the tragic human toll, these can be very persuasive within company management.
- Domestic violence is also a legal issue. There are myriad legal exposures for employers. Most states and locales have enacted legislation designed to create protections for victims. There are also broader laws that can apply such as antidiscrimination laws, hostile work environment and FMLA.
- Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behaviors. Each situation is unique. Whether it occurs on and/or off the work site, it interferes with an individual’s capability to safely and securely perform duties at work.
- Anyone can be a victim or an abuser. This applies to the receptionist as much as to the CEO or contractors in and around the workplace.
- Many victims do not leave for fear of separation violence, lack of resources, family responsibilities and relationships, emotions, or religious or moral convictions. We need to think about how we can help someone be safe—whether they choose to stay or leave.
- The abuser may be using workplace resources to abuse the victim, which can increase the employer’s exposure to liability. It is important to not only focus on helping the victim but also the abuser—for legal reasons as well as workplace productivity.
- Suggested action:
 - Develop a policy to:
 - Heighten awareness of domestic violence and its effects in the workplace.
 - Provide support *when requested*.
 - Provide information and referrals to employees where assistance can be sought. An employer should never be the resource to assist.
 - Train supervisors and employees to recognize the signs—physical, emotional, social, financial, legal and work-related.
 - Know how to respond:
 - Listen, and let the victim know the door is always open.
 - Keep it confidential (very important).
 - Provide information but not advice.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

- Be there and be patient.
- Know the resources in the community.
- Employers can:
 - Educate. Create a supportive environment through training.
 - Flex. Accommodate needs where appropriate—management may need to get creative in collaboration with the victim.
 - Refer. Form partnerships with advocacy organizations.
 - Secure the safety of the victim, employees and third parties.
 - Comply with the myriad laws governing conduct.
- Use the EAP. It can provide services and referrals.
- Verizon has successfully implemented a domestic violence awareness program in its workplace. Verizon's goal was to help secure the safety of all employees, ensure a consistent process to handle domestic-violence cases and transfer requests, and provide the proper tools and resources for everyone involved to get help, evaluate the process and make improvements. The program is comprehensive and integrates a range of services and functional areas within the company and labor unions. It includes, but is not limited to, employee and manager trainings, companywide communications, revised policies and procedures regarding domestic violence, counseling and a relocation program.

As confounding and complex as this issue is, together, we can make a difference—and the response to this series was a compelling demonstration of how much employers care.