

How Can You Help?

EMPLOYERS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO SUPPORT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS IN THEIR WORKPLACE

By Heather Hudson

What issue costs Canadian employers \$77.9 million every year? Domestic violence. And that's an answer that may be surprising to some.

New research indicates that it's probably affecting someone in your workplace right now.

"Over a lifetime, one in three workers will experience domestic violence. If you have a workforce of any size, you can be almost certain that the problem is there," said Barb MacQuarrie, community director of the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children at Western University in Ontario.

A 2014 survey of more than 8,400 people, conducted by The University of Western Ontario and the Canadian Labour Congress, found that 33.6 per cent experienced domestic violence from a partner and 35.4 per cent reported having at least one co-worker who they believe has experienced it.

Domestic violence can enter the workplace through harassing phone calls, unwanted visits, disruptive texts and emails, as well as distraction, fatigue, lateness, absences, unexplained or frequent bruises and sudden changes in residence.

In 2015, The Conference Board of Canada released the report, *Domestic Violence and the Role of the Employer*, which examined what Canadian employers are doing to support employees experiencing domestic violence.

policies & procedures

Charles Boyer, research associate with the Conference Board's Workplace Health and Wellness Research Group and co-author of the report, says the employer does have a role to play to protect its employees from the impact of domestic violence.

"In some provinces, when an employer finds out that an employee is experiencing domestic violence that will likely put them in harm's way, the employer has a duty to put in place reasonable precautions to protect the employee," he said.

The report found that employers have an opportunity to enhance the health and wellbeing of employees experiencing domestic violence, but that few offer training and education to managers and employees on understanding and addressing these issues.

To date, only Ontario and British Columbia have passed legislation relating to domestic violence in the workplace.

"Ontario is the first province to explicitly mention domestic violence [in its

workplace legislation], but many provinces have provisions that give employers responsibility for preventing and responding to violence in the workplace," said MacQuarrie.

In 2007, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety included domestic violence in its third edition of the Violence in the Workplace Prevention Guide, proving that awareness is seeping through, though not as assertively as MacQuarrie would like.

"There are some really progressive employers, but, for the most part, this is still not 'big time' on the agenda of employers and HR," she said. "We've got a long way to go to really understanding this."

HOW CAN HR ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE?

The impact of domestic violence can become a real workplace concern, according to Boyer. It affects victims' wellbeing and productivity every day. And employers recognize that.

"We asked employers if they think domestic violence impacts performance and productivity and, across the board, 96 per cent agreed that of course it does," said Boyer. "Most of them agreed that paid leave, safety policies and other supports could help victims regain their health and wellbeing."

In most workplaces, the HR department is the ideal place to form policies that help support victims of domestic violence and restore productivity in the workplace.

The first step is for HR professionals to seek training on domestic violence for themselves. Organizations such as your company's EAP, women's shelters and legal aid will help you find out what community supports are available to those in need – and how best to access them.

MacQuarrie says training can also be found in educational institutions like hers at the University of Western Ontario.

"Here at the Research Centre Workplace Education Program, we have options of training that can be customized," she said. "This type of training is readily available all over the country."

When it comes to creating policy, MacQuarrie suggests including:

- A definition of the problem (domestic

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– CHARLES BOYER, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, WORK-PLACE HEALTH AND WELLNESS RESEARCH GROUP, THE CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA



- violence) and potential signs
- A statement of the kind of support available in the workplace
- Identification of support people in the workplace for employees to access if they suspect domestic violence or are victims of it themselves
- An outline of what will happen when an employee turns to the support program for help

An important component of any domestic violence policy is confidentiality.

“I wouldn’t recommend guaranteeing absolute confidentiality, but to the extent possible – with information being shared only to ensure safety,” said MacQuarrie. “When you have obligations to protect everybody in the workplace, some other people are going to have to know to be part of a plan.”

Boyer says managers and employees will ultimately need to be well trained on detecting the signs of domestic violence and understand the workplace policy on handling it.

“They are the ones who will likely first detect or hear about signs of abuse and should know where they can turn to address this and better support a co-worker,” he said.

While a workplace policy on domestic violence should include access to

community resources, the employer may also consider what can be done within the organization to help protect and support the employee.

These include:

- Leave policies or flexible work arrangements for court or legal appointments
- Accommodations such as:
 - Telephone screening
 - Changes to paycheck delivery
 - Equipping security with a photograph of the abuser

Manitoba recently introduced legislation that provides paid leave to employees experiencing domestic violence. They’re following the lead of the government of Australia, which has more than 860 individual collective agreements covering 2 million workers that gives employees access to paid leave.

“Part of the cost associated with domestic violence is driven by losses in employment. Supportive practices like paid leave for an employee to go to court or seek counseling can indicate to an employee that the organization will support them and help them regain their health and wellbeing,” said Boyer. “In our previous experience in other health-related areas, employees who are connected to the workplace

through meaningful work are better able to regain their health and wellbeing. Helping a worker stay connected and supported not only helps the health of an employee, but may also help save an organization’s bottom line by having these employees avoid longer health-related leaves of absence.”

IS THERE AN OBLIGATION TO REPORT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TO THE POLICE?

Under the Ontario legislation, the obligation to report is for an attempt, threat or incident of violence and there’s a similar threshold across jurisdictions, says MacQuarrie.

“Just because you’re aware that somebody is experiencing domestic violence doesn’t mean you have to report it,” she said.

She emphasizes that employees should be trained to report the suspicion of domestic violence to a supervisor within the workplace, not the police.

“Reporting is a scary word and tends to have a very official interpretation,” she said. “Sometimes, what’s needed is a consultation about somebody who is experiencing difficulties and how can we get together to do some problem solving. Ultimately, what you want to see coming out of these situations is a safety plan.” ■