VIOLENCE VISITS THE BANK

Employees may be victims of domestic abuse. What are your bank’s duties?

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‘Tis the Season to be Jolly”...

But instead I’m going to take this space to discuss a deadly serious issue that comes up for banks quite often: domestic violence at home that follows an employee to work.

This threatens not only her safety, job performance, and attendance, but the security of fellow employees and bank customers.

One in four women is a victim of domestic violence, according to studies, so the odds are that domestic violence is already affecting your bank, given the high proportion of female banking employees.

Now and then, horrific attacks, such as the one that resulted in the killing of eight at a Southern California beauty salon in October, focus attention momentarily on the issue. In that case, the shooter was the ex-husband of a salon employee involved in a custody battle. But we tend not to make the connection with our own workplace, falling into the mistakes of thinking, “It could never happen here,” or “We already have a policy for that.”

But yes, it could happen at your bank.

And, unless your workplace violence policy specifically addresses domestic violence, you are likely unprepared to identify the risk, and therefore to prevent or mitigate its invasion onto bank premises.

Putting the proper policy in place

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and ASIS International have jointly published a National Standard on Workplace Violence and Prevention.

This standard devotes considerable attention to integrating the issue of “intimate partner” violence into workplace violence prevention strategies.

Most important: The standard urges that companies include domestic violence specifically in the workplace violence policy statement. Such a statement should make clear that:

• The bank treats threats coming from abusive personal relationships as it does all other forms of violence.

• Employees are encouraged to report their safety concerns without fear of retaliation or adverse job consequences. They should also report restraining orders (“stay away” orders) that have been put in place by the courts.

• The bank will support victims by providing appropriate referrals to community or employee assistance program resources.

• The bank will provide time off to victims as needed to attend court, find shelter accommodation, or seek medical or legal assistance. (Check state and local law on this matter.)

• It is a violation to stalk, threaten, or harass anyone at the bank or elsewhere while on the job or using the bank’s resources (computer, telephone, or vehicle).

For more help in drafting a suitable policy, the Safe@Work Coalition has a website at: http://www.safeatworkcoalition.org

Training your bank’s team

Does your bank have an Emergency Response Team? I hope so. But the members of that team may not have recognized domestic violence as within their purview. They need training, as do HR personnel and other managers who may be called on to respond to an employee-victim situation.

Basic training should consist of:

• The warning signs of domestic abuse:

* arrives early or late to work

* takes unplanned time off

* productivity decreases because of taking harassing phone calls or visits, or inability to concentrate because of them

* avoids windows, doors, and main entrance to the building

* wears long sleeves or sunglasses at inappropriate times to conceal injuries

* shows physical injuries

* shows fear, anxiety, depression, or fatigue

• How to approach an employee-victim in an appropriate, effective, and compassionate way, keeping in mind privacy issues.

• What resources are available through the bank or in the community to assist

• What the bank’s policy says and what its legal obligations are. Several states require time off for abuse victims, but the laws vary as to who is eligible for such leave; for what purposes it can be taken; how much leave must be given; and what notice or documentation must be provided. The Family and Medical Leave Act might also apply, as well as state and federal anti-discrimination laws.

Encouraging a speak-up culture

Employees who are victims of domestic violence may be reluctant to seek help from the bank, or may deny that it is taking place even when approached with assurances of support. If they don’t want assistance, that’s their prerogative, but the bank is still obligated to protect the employee and her co-workers on the bank’s premises. That includes taking reasonable steps to be on the lookout for the abuser, and asking local police to patrol the parking area.

Ultimately, creating an environment where employees will feel confident in coming forward with their concerns, whether about their personal safety or other issues, is the best strategy to preventing domestic violence in the workplace.

Building that trust depends on establishing the policy outlined above; providing helpful information and referral services; offering alternative confidential channels of communication, including an employee hotline; making a commitment not to retaliate in any way against employees who voice concerns; and dealing promptly, confidentially and fairly with any issue raised, including domestic violence.

Easier said than done?

Of course, but ignoring this pervasive problem will not make it go away.

Have a happy and safe holiday. See you in the New Year.

About the author

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