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WHITE PAPER: Domestic Violence as a Workplace Concern

Ellen works for a small shipping company in the western Canada city of Vancouver. She has been unhappily married to Paul for more than 20 years, and she and her two daughters bear the brunt of Paul's verbal taunts and controlling behavior. Though he has never physically abused the children, he often beats Ellen so severely that vicious bruises cover her arms and legs, and she regularly lies to her coworkers about their origin, claiming clumsiness, embarrassed by their true cause. At least once a month Ellen is so badly hurt that she must call out of work. In the past two years alone, she has lost 22 days of work, and thousands of dollars in wages.

One night, Paul angrily smacks Ellen's younger daughter, and she falls down the stairs, cutting open her knee. After years of abuse, Ellen has finally had enough, and leaves. She moves in with a friend, and changes her phone number and personal email address. For a while things are fine. But soon Ellen begins receiving threatening prank phone calls at the office, and nasty emails to her work email account. She thinks it might be Paul, and her suspicions are confirmed when one evening she discovers him waiting for her in the office parking lot. In a dark and menacing tone Paul threatens to kill her—and their children— unless she returns to him.

She doesn't know who to turn to or where to go. For years she has been hiding her abuse from her friends, family, coworkers and employers, and the threats continue to escalate...

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).

A 2005 survey by the CDC released in 2008 reported that one-quarter of U.S. women suffer domestic violence at some time in their lives. Estimates also pointed to 1,200 women killed each year, with the violence resulting in two million injuries, and more than a quarter requiring medical attention, according to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The National Organization for Women makes the point even more graphically: Each day four women in the U.S. die as a result of domestic violence. The number of women murdered by their intimate partners to date is greater than the number of soldiers killed in the Vietnam War.

Women in other countries also suffer domestic and intimate partner violence, which often spills out into the workplace. Out of 10 countries surveyed in a 2005 study by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching a staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia. In addition, a 2006 survey by the Japanese government reported that 22.6 percent of Japanese women had suffered some form of violence or harassment at the hands of their

spouse once or twice. Almost half of all victims did not tell anyone about it, usually because they felt it would not help or because they were ashamed.

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. According to a 2007 study by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence (CAEPV), more than 75 percent of domestic violence perpetrators used workplace resources to express remorse or anger towards, check up on, pressure, or threaten their victim. As such, abusers often 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. In addition, each year domestic violence costs American businesses more than \$4.1 billion in health care-related services for victims and an additional \$727.8 million in productivity losses, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

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 costs business as much as 2.7 billion pounds a year in lost productivity. It is estimated that around half of the costs of absences is borne by the employer and half by the individual in lost wages. The total cost of domestic violence for the UK as a whole, employers and victims, is estimated at 23 billion pounds a year.

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 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. In another CAEPV study in 2007, 44 percent of respondents personally experienced domestic violence's impact on the workplace, most frequently because a co-worker was a victim. This heightened victims' and coworkers' sense of fear, which may be well-founded. According to a 2007 study by the Family Violence Prevention Fund, 91 percent of senior corporate executives said that domestic violence affects both the private and working lives of their employees. In addition, 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, according to 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. A 2007 survey of senior executives by

CAEPV member Liz Claiborne, however, uncovered some interesting statistics. That report found that although 90 percent of corporate leaders believed intimate partner violence affected the working lives of employees, only 13 percent said that corporations should play a major part in addressing the issue. In a parallel employee survey by CAEPV, 90 percent of employees indicated company representatives should be trained to recognize the signs of domestic violence. Despite the impact of domestic violence in the workplace, over 70 percent of workplaces in the U.S. have no formal program or policy that addresses this issue, with one 2007 national study showing that 61 percent of American men believing employers should be doing more to address domestic violence in the workplace.

All employers 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.

To that end, in September 2007 a group of CEOs made a commitment to their employees and stakeholders through *SafeWork 2010*, a national initiative created by CAEPV member Safe Horizon, a victim assistance agency, in partnership with the CAEPV. The program challenges corporate leaders to recognize the impact of domestic violence in the workplace and address it. Through education, training, research, public awareness and innovative initiatives, *SafeWork* aims to help companies keep their employees safe and protect their bottom line.

Legislation also is pending to help victims of domestic violence in the workplace. "*Too Much, Too Long? Domestic Violence in the Workplace*" was the topic of a hearing before the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety in April 2007. Advocates at the hearing pressed for the passage of the *Survivors' Empowerment and Security Act* to promote the economic security of victims. The Act would keep domestic violence victims from losing their jobs because they need time off to get restraining orders. It also would make them eligible for unemployment benefits.

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 customizes 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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