

Domestic Violence: A Union Concern

The odds are that at some point in your work as a steward you'll be faced with having to deal with the work-related consequences of a co-worker who is victimized by domestic violence.

How does domestic violence come to work? A member has missed work because of repeated injuries. Perhaps she's being texted repeatedly on the job by an ex-partner (who could be a co-worker). Maybe she's met after work on payday and is forced to turn over her check. Domestic violence affects these workers' security, on the job as well as at home. The union may be able to help.

Domestic violence is a serious, recognizable and preventable problem that affects a significant number of union members. Women are much more likely to be victimized: 85 percent of domestic violence acts and 78 percent of stalking actions are against women.

It Involves Complex Issues

How can someone else's situation at home become an issue at work? What can you do about it? Here's an example.

A member comes to you, her steward, because she has been repeatedly warned about afternoon tardiness. She confides in you that she has "personal business" at a set time every week that she doesn't want to discuss any further. She wants you to protect her from what might be a disciplinary action.

Coincidentally, you have heard through the grapevine that this member has been seen in heated arguments with her ex-partner, who works in a different department. And another member recently confided in you that he'd been asked to walk with this person to the bus stop; during the walk she seemed "very nervous."

You are concerned for this member, but all she tells you is that she is being

warned about tardiness. You tell her that unexcused, unexplained tardiness is subject to discipline and that the union is there to help. She finally reveals that her ex-partner is abusive.

Your role as steward is to focus on the job-related consequences and what the union can do to help the member keep her job. It is essential that you remain non-judgmental and keep confidential any information about the member's situation. If you need to share information with other union reps, do so only on a need-to-know basis and with the permission of the member.

Given the traumatic personal nature of abuse, be aware that the member may not readily reveal all pertinent information to you. Do not assume this means the member is not credible.

If you are the first person to whom the member has disclosed her abusive situation, consider referring her to a counselor or advocate, such as an Employee Assistance Program worker. Or, consider getting guidance yourself on how to help the member. To take advantage of workplace protections, where there are relevant laws, it is likely the member will have to disclose the abuse to the employer. However, because of shame, fear, or other reasons this may be difficult for her. Help her locate a local service provider/advocate in your area by contacting the National Domestic Violence Hotline (www.ncadv.org).

Laws that provide victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking with employment rights vary across the U.S. (<http://www.legalmomentum.org/employment-and-victims-violence>) and Canada (www.makeitourbusiness.com).

In any case where you are trying to help a worker affected by domestic violence, determine in what ways her employment is being negatively affected and whether she needs changes at work to stay safe.

- Is she being harassed by her abuser at work? What kind of safety plan should be put into place?
- Does she think the abuse has affected her work performance; is she worried about losing her job?
- Is she suffering from health-related problems as a result of the violence?
- Has she told her boss about the abuse? If so, what was the reaction? Did she get the help that she needs?

Figure out what options your member may have under her employer's policies.

- Does she have accrued personal leave, sick leave, or vacation time?
- Are there accommodations that can be made at the workplace (such as a new phone extension, varied hours, alerting security, time off to attend court dates or relocate)?
- Does her employer have a workplace violence or domestic violence policy? A sexual harassment policy? (This is especially important if the abuser is a co-worker).

Figure out your member's options.

- What does the contract say about domestic violence or complaints of harassment?
- Is there an employee/member assistance program or community resource to refer the worker to?
- If the member is ready to disclose the abuse to her employer, she should be prepared to offer documentation. If she has sought assistance from a community-based service provider, a letter from the service provider can be very helpful.

You might also take a proactive approach to addressing the issue by suggesting that the union coordinate educational awareness programs with local community service providers at union meetings or conferences.

Remember: it is your job to help union members avoid discipline, retain their jobs, remain safe, and be productive members of the workforce. By doing so, you can greatly assist members who are experiencing job-related consequences when domestic violence comes to work.

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