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3 Ways Companies Can Support Employees Facing Domestic Violence

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Employee domestic abuse costs U.S. businesses an estimated three to five billion dollars annually from lost productivity, health care expenses, and violence in the workplace. Experts identify best practices and make the business case for employers to support employees facing domestic violence. **Less**

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At least 41% of women and 26% of men in the U.S. experience intimate partner violence or stalking during their lifetime, according to 2024 data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Domestic abuse impacts companies directly when violence occurs at a worksite. But employers also incur significant indirect costs through employee turnover, lost productivity, and increased health care costs for employees facing domestic violence.

Two research studies released this year by professors from Bentley University and Penn State Dickinson Law make the business case for companies to support employees who are facing domestic abuse. The researchers offer specific steps that employers can take to help employees safely navigate domestic violence situations.

Why Is Employee Domestic Violence A Business Issue?

Among employed adults experiencing domestic violence, 64% report a negative impact on their workplace performance, according to U.S. Congressional findings for the VAWA Reauthorization Act of 2022. Survivors of intimate partner violence lose nearly 8,000,000 days of paid work annually, which equates to more than 32,000 full-time jobs. Half of all sexual assault survivors lose their jobs or are forced to quit in the wake of their abuse.

Domestic violence often enters the workplace more directly. Abusers frequently assert financial control by interfering with their partners' ability to work, including stalking or harassing at their worksite. Domestic partners or relatives commit 43% of workplace homicides against women, according to the Congressional findings.

These impacts of domestic abuse cost U.S. businesses an estimated three to five billion dollars annually from lost productivity, health care expenses, and violence in the workplace, according to a [2025 research paper](#) by Bentley University professors Marianne Kulow and Maria Granik, published in the *Harvard Law School Journal on Legislation*.

“Overall, employers who support employees experiencing intimate partner violence benefit from higher retention rates, a safer work environment, and an improved public image,” said Kulow and Granik, via email. “Thinking about the balance of costs and benefits convinced us that the business case for supporting employees through intimate partner violence is actually as strong as the ethical case.”

How Employers Can Protect Employees Facing Domestic Violence

Researchers offer three suggestions for how employers can better support employees who are experiencing domestic abuse.

1. Design 401(k) Plans to Support Employees Facing Domestic Violence

Lack of financial resources is a leading contributor to an individual's inability to leave a domestic violence situation. So investing in employees' economic independence is a critical way that employers can provide support.

“Giving domestic abuse victims financial empowerment so that they can both escape their abuser and be positioned to stay free is crucial,” said Samantha J. Prince, professor at Penn State Dickinson Law, in a [forthcoming article](#) in the *Business & Finance Law Review*.

Prince's article highlights a federal law that empowers companies to modify their 401(k) plans to support employees facing domestic abuse. The SECURE 2.0 Act was signed by President Biden on December 29, 2022 and became effective on January 1, 2024.

To incentivize savings, employees who take early withdrawals from their 401(k) retirement plans typically face a 10% financial penalty. The SECURE 2.0 Act allows employers to opt into an exception permitting employees to withdraw vested 401(k) funds up to certain caps without any financial penalty within one year that they, or their child or household family member, is subjected to domestic abuse.

"It is critical for employers to offer domestic abuse victim distributions in their plans so that those in need do not sacrifice 10% of their money to the government," said Prince, via email. "This additional 10% is better spent on trying to escape and stay free."

Prince also recommends that employers eliminate any vesting schedules that delay employee access to employer contributions to 401(k) plans. Immediate vesting of employer retirement contributions increases the funds available to employees who need emergency withdrawals to escape domestic abuse.

"When someone must escape prior to vesting, they have less money in their account," explained Prince, "which could be significant in aiding their escape and achieving financial independence so they do not return to their abuser."

To be effective, however, employers must ensure that employees are aware of these important design aspects of their 401(k) plans.

"Employers should not only allow for these potentially life-saving 401(k) distributions," said Prince, "they should also be transparent about them so that those in need know they can access these funds without paying a penalty."

Increasing [retirement plan transparency](#) can also have added benefits in [advancing gender equity](#) and aiding in recruiting and retention.

2. Comply with State Law Protections for Employees Facing Domestic Violence

At least 44 states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring employers to provide various support for employees who are experiencing domestic violence, according to Kulow and Granik's research. These laws vary significantly from state to state.

Some states require employers to provide job-protected leave related to domestic abuse. Some states require employers to offer reasonable accommodations to employees dealing with domestic violence. Some states prohibit discrimination or retaliation against employees who are facing domestic abuse, even when the situation requires employees to miss work. Other state laws impact employer access to restraining orders against abusers, employee access to unemployment benefits, and other workplace policies.

Kulow and Granik encourage employers to become educated about compliance with the specific laws in their states related to employee domestic abuse. Legal Momentum offers a free [online](#)

[guide](#) of all state employment laws related to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

3. Adopt Workplace Policies to Support Employees Facing Domestic Violence

Less than 30% of U.S. workplaces have a formal policy addressing violence at their workplace, and far fewer have policies addressing employee domestic abuse more broadly, according to the 2022 Congressional findings. Only 4% of employers provide any workplace training on domestic violence issues.

While 17 states require their state agencies to adopt policies addressing employee domestic violence, no state imposes a similar requirement on private businesses, according to Kulow and Granik's research. Eight states have laws encouraging companies to voluntarily adopt domestic violence policies.

Employers should begin with an internal audit to assess their own policies and practices related to employee domestic abuse. Best practices include prohibiting discrimination or retaliation against employees because they are experiencing domestic violence, and posting resource and referral information in visible workplace locations and employee orientation materials.

The main goal for employers is “to create a culture in which employees do not fear retaliation for telling their manager about experiencing intimate partner violence,” said Kulow and Granik, via email.

Employers should also consider making workplace flexibility options available for employees to obtain medical care, counseling, or legal assistance related to domestic abuse.

“Economic independence is an essential condition for being able to separate from an abusive relationship,” said Kulow and Granik. They encourage employers to provide paid leave for employees experiencing domestic abuse, “in the same way that they offer leave for other personal and family-related reasons.”

Experts also recommend educating managers about domestic abuse, its prevalence, and its impacts in the workplace, and training managers on how to recognize signs that an employee is experiencing domestic violence. Best practices include safety and emergency response training for violence incidents at the worksite.

“Employers are uniquely situated to spot and address intimate partner violence because people experiencing relationship violence are often socially isolated as a result of their abusive partner's controlling behavior,” said Kulow and Granik.

Employers should also consider policies directed at employees who are committing domestic abuse. These may include: a “zero-tolerance” policy for perpetrators; a policy prohibiting use of work resources or work time to threaten or abuse others; and a confidential system for employees to report concerns about co-worker violence.

Sample workplace policies, resources, and training guides for employers are available through the Workplaces Respond To Domestic & Sexual Violence [online resource center](#). Legal Momentum has

also created an [employer guide](#) on recommended policies to support employees facing domestic violence.



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