

Sexual and Domestic Violence at Work: The Role of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

On June 2, 2011, hotel housekeepers in several cities across the country held coordinated protests to demand that their employers, the hotel industry, take steps to prevent and address sexual violence at work. This, after a New York City hotel housekeeper alleged that former International Monetary Fund chief, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, raped her in the workplace. This arrest and others have prompted the hotel industry to consider new safety rules and training, such as panic buttons that hotel workers would carry to rooms with them.

Sexual and Domestic Violence at Work?

Workers, usually women and often immigrant women, routinely face a spectrum of indignities and harassment up to and including rape as a byproduct of their daily routines. Rape and sexual torture can occur at work, despite the widely held misconception that its victims live only in conflict zones or are assaulted by strangers in dark allies in crime ridden cities. Sexual violence is a pervasive security risk and personal safety threat to workers in the United States.¹ The violence against hotel workers illustrates several issues of concern to all employers; sexual and domestic violence results in health care costs, loss of productivity, employee retention issues, and legal liability. But are most employers competent to address the individual needs of crime victims and sustain workplace violence prevention efforts in addition to the typical, day-to-day management and supervisory obligations?

What is an EAP?

An Employer Assistance Programs (EAP) is a valuable and viable resource for employers to utilize to address the issues of domestic and sexual violence in the workplace. EAPs are workplace-based programs that provide services to employers and employees on a wide range of issues that can impact an individual and a company's bottom line. Losses, both personal and professional, often require confidential and professional assistance. EAPs have the capacity and experience to intervene with individuals, as well as to develop preventative infrastructures organization-wide. Many EAPs already offer domestic and sexual violence counseling and education as a part of comprehensive health and wellness centered portfolios of employer services. Studies show that employers can receive a considerable return on investment when they contract for EAP services. For instance, McDonnell Douglas conducted one study on how an EAP impacted health care costs for employers and found up to a 4:1 ration of return. In addition, the study found that employees who used the EAP services had fewer absences, fewer accidents, and longer retention.²

One EAP Initiative

ValueOptions, a national provider of managed behavioral health and EAP services, launched a domestic violence initiative in 2005 for which Verizon Communications served as a corporate model:

¹ Duhart, D. (2001). Violence in the Workplace, 1993-99. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/vw99.pdf>.

² George E. Hargrave and Deirdre Hiatt, *The EAP Treatment of Depressed Employees: Implications for Return on Investment (2007)* available at https://www.mhn.com/static/pdfs/The_EAP_Treatment_of_Depressed_Employees.pdf

The initiative is aimed at guiding employers through the construction and development of a domestic violence prevention and response program, and it provides the tools and resources employers need to accomplish this.

The materials and consultation that ValueOptions provides includes a presentation to enlist senior management support, suggestions for building a cross-functional workgroup, sample policies, and guidance in crafting a communication strategy. Tools include work-site training sessions, articles, tip sheets, posters, intranet graphics, sample e-mail messages, and a sample timeline. The program also includes special training for EAPs to raise awareness of domestic violence when they conduct detailed assessments, facilitate linkages with available resources, and provide counseling and support.³

For More Information

EAPs, such as ValueOptions and others, can provide the support and time that employers may lack to address domestic and sexual violence in the workplace in a comprehensive, efficient, safe, and practical way. For more information on EAP services, visit the Employee Assistance Society of North America at www.EASNA.org. EASNA is a trade association focused on advancing knowledge, research, and best practices toward achieving healthy and productive workplaces.

³ Charlie Bowman, *EAP's domestic violence role: one MBHO/EAP teamed up with a major telecommunications provider to address the problem through the workplace in Behavioral Health Management* (2005), available at <http://www.amazon.com/EAPs-domestic-violence-role-telecommunications/dp/B000CIX1JM>.