



Domestic violence

A workplace issue

Lost productivity caused by domestic violence costs the wider New Zealand economy at least \$368 million per year, says Asher Goldman. It's a major issue affecting people's lives at work, their ability to retain jobs, and to do them well.

Family violence was traditionally seen as a personal issue—one that takes place at home, and should only be dealt with in that sphere. Recent efforts like the Government's *It's Not OK* campaign have helped to dispel that myth, and we are now moving towards a consensus that New Zealand's plague of domestic abuse needs to be dealt with at a wider, societal level.

The Public Service Association, New Zealand's largest union, has contributed to this with two recently published reports looking at the impacts of family violence on people's working lives. The PSA represents over 58,000 members working in the public service and the wider state sector, local government, district health boards, and community organisations.

While taking action on family violence may seem to some to fall outside a union's purview, the PSA national secretary Brenda Pilott strongly believes that this work is key to their mission statement—for a better working life.

"Unions aren't just about wages, but about improving the overall working experience of their members," says Pilott. "Over two-thirds of our union members are women, and we know that domestic violence will harm not just their personal lives, but also their careers."

Jackie Blue, a commissioner at the Human Rights Commission and a former National MP, agrees. "It's a union issue because family violence is so pervasive and people who are victims of it are in the workplace," she says. "The fact that the PSA has taken the chance to highlight this issue is fantastic."

THE RESEARCH

The Impacts of Domestic Violence on Workers and the Workplace by Margaret Thomas is based on a survey of PSA members' experiences of domestic violence and the impact it has had on their working life.

Pilott says that Thomas's report shows that domestic violence is a major issue affecting New Zealanders' lives at work, their ability to retain jobs, and to do them well.

"Twenty-six percent of respondents had direct experience of family violence and, of those, 53 percent needed to take time off work and 38 percent said that the violence made it difficult for them to get to work," says Pilott.

The impact is not solely felt by the victims themselves.

Thomas's research shows that the workmates of victims are negatively affected as well, as they are forced to cover for domestic violence victims' lower rates of productivity and absences. All of this has an impact on the employer's bottom line.

A second piece of research, commissioned by the PSA, shows that lost productivity caused by domestic violence costs the wider New Zealand economy at least \$368 million per year.

Productivity Gains from Workplace Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence by economist Suzanne Sniveley looks in some detail at the many ways that domestic violence can have an impact on workers' productivity and the flow-on effects that this has.

Pilott welcomes the research, saying it shows that significant savings could be made by employers if victims of domestic violence are properly supported in the workplace.

LESSONS FROM OVERSEAS

Neither piece of research stops at identifying the problem, however. But a common theme runs through both documents—that workers who are victims of domestic violence need clear entitlements so they can disclose their situations to employers, confident they will get the support they need.

We can learn much from Australia. The *Safe at Home, Safe at Work* project is a joint effort by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the University of New South Wales.

Working across Australia with both employers and unions, the project has been able to successfully raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence on work, and to promote concrete policies that are helping workers to escape from violent situations, to protect them from abusive current or former partners, and to ensure that they feel supported to be able to continue working.

Over one million Australian workers are now covered by specific domestic violence clauses in their collective agreement. These include:

- Management or HR training to be the contact for employees seeking support or managers seeking guidance;
- Training for delegates and health and safety reps and others who victims are likely to disclose to;
- Policies on dealing with situations that could face the victims of family violence;

- Staff training to ensure the policy is well understood;
- Practical support at work;
- Paid leave to attend court, talk with legal advisors and domestic violence counsellors;
- Safety planning measures to protect employees at work—for example, by changing work location or phone or email contacts, varying start and finish times;
- A commitment not to discriminate against victims of family violence;
- Processes to protect a victim's privacy.

The Australian example shows that these sorts of policies can be hugely beneficial to both employers and employees. Any short-term costs are quickly recouped through increased staff loyalty, reduced recruitment and training costs, and better productivity—for example, where a staff member is able to work from a different office to avoid harassment at work, rather than not turning up at all.

Blue says that if “you help a woman who needs support—whether it's time off or going to see a lawyer or doctor or making them safe at work—you get repaid with loyalty that will pay dividends in the long run.”

TAKING ACTION IN NEW ZEALAND

The PSA is promoting the use of similar clauses when negotiating collective agreements. They are also talking with peak bodies such as the State Services Commission, and with Government and Opposition politicians, in order to gain their support for this work.

Getting the Government involved has the support of Jackie Blue, who says that “a smart government” would see the upside to taking action and would get involved.

“We want to see New Zealand employers follow suit,” says Pilott. “Taking action will save money as well as being the right thing to do.”

The Employers and Manufacturers Association has come out in support of the findings, with chief executive Kim Campbell saying that apart from the “terrible personal trauma”, there was a practical employers' point of view. “If you've got a good person who's living through that, then their productivity is affected.”

HR practitioners have an important part to play in promoting these policies. If they have the proper training, they can play a vital role in supporting employees through what can be difficult situations.

Research that shows that for many victims of domestic violence, work is a crucial ‘safe space’ where they can go and not have to worry. Additionally, the financial independence that stable work provides can be key to giving victims the strength they need to escape from abusive situations.

Employees are often loathe to ask for help. Many fear that family violence will be seen as a personal failing, and to reveal it takes great courage. Having clear policies, and HR practitioners

who are trained to respond to disclosures of this nature, will help employees to know that they can safely talk about what is happening and to seek the help they need.

EMPOWERING WORKERS

Another approach is finding success at the Department of Corrections. Led by PSA delegate and corrections officer Marshall Tangaroa, PSA members are involved in a pilot project with the Department of Corrections and the *It's Not OK* campaign to raise awareness in the workplace about family violence.

“We come across a lot of people in prisons who experience family violence, both abusers and victims,” said Marshall Tangaroa. “We're trying to raise awareness and learning how to take the opportunity to ask those hard questions.”

The project is being fully supported by Corrections management. This has included paid release for a training day held in May this year for violence-prevention champions.

Janine Trethewey, a nurse at Manawatu prison, put her hand up to be an *It's Not OK* champion. “I think this is a hugely important programme,” she says. “As champions, we will be making sure our colleagues are OK and helping them in the right direction if they're not. Having a nursing background helps as I already know some of the agencies in my community.”

Kasimilo Mekaio, a Corrections officer at Rimutaka prison, also took part in the training to be an *It's Not OK* violence-prevention champion. He grew up in a community where family violence was the norm, but he decided it wasn't the way it was going to be for his family, either his partner or his two small daughters.

“It is a vicious cycle that needs to be brought out in the open and spoken about, not hidden,” he says. “The more people who talk about it, the more they will say this really is not OK.” 

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Productivity Gains from Workplace Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence by Suzanne Snively: psa.org.nz/Libraries/Documents_2014/Workplace_Productivity_Improvements_for_DV_21_May_2014.sflb.ashx

The Impacts of Domestic Violence on Workers and the Workplace by Margaret Thomas: psa.org.nz/Libraries/PSA_Document_2/The_Impacts_of_Domestic_Violence_on_Workers_and_the_Workplace_-_Margaret_Rayner-Thomas.sflb.ashx

Family Violence and New Zealand Workplaces—the PSA's hub for its activity on this issue: psa.org.nz/CampaignsAndIssues/FamilyViolence-AndNewZealandWorkplaces.aspx

Safe at Home, Safe at Work: dvandwork.unsw.edu.au/

Family Violence—It's Not OK: areyouok.org.nz/

White Ribbon campaign: whiteribbon.org.nz/

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