

Domestic Violence Is Not a Private Problem

Advocates and experts have been insisting for years that family violence and domestic abuse are not private issues. The psychological and financial consequences are borne by networks of neighbours, friends and families and by our health care, social service and criminal justice systems. [A 2012 report](#) conservatively estimated the economic costs in Canada to be over 7 billion dollars.

Although the workplace bears its share of these costs, for many years we acted as if there was an invisible barrier between home and work, keeping domestic violence out of our workplaces. Only recently have we developed legislative frameworks to involve employers in preventing and responding to domestic violence. Had we been paying attention, we would have realized much earlier that domestic violence follows people to work, sometimes with deadly consequences.

Tragedies as Wake-Up Calls

With alarming regularity, workers in Canada have been murdered as a result of domestic violence. In 2000, [Tony McNaughton](#), a Starbucks manager in Vancouver, was murdered when he intervened to protect one of his employees from her knife wielding estranged husband. Tragedy struck next in 2004 when the husband of 47-year-old grade 10 teacher [Aysegul Candir](#) shot her in the head multiple times in the school parking lot. She was pronounced dead in hospital later that day. The following year nurse [Lori Dupont](#) was murdered by her ex-partner, a doctor at the hospital where they both worked. Then in 2012 [Stephanie Chaisson](#), a receptionist at a health clinic was murdered at work by her estranged husband. Most recently, [Lisa Graves Smith](#) was murdered in 2019 at her workplace in New Brunswick. She was killed by a co-worker whom she had dated briefly and told that she didn't want to pursue a relationship.

Responses to Tragedies

Following Tony McNaughton's death, in 2012, WorkSafe B.C. produced a handbook for employers on addressing domestic violence in the workplace and other [related resources](#). The

province of Ontario responded to recommendations from the Coroner's Inquest into Lori Dupont's death in 2010 by making changes to the province's [Occupational Health and Safety legislation](#). For the first time ever, domestic violence was explicitly recognized as a workplace hazard. This gave employers the responsibility to prevent and respond to domestic violence when it impacts the workplace. In other parts of the country, governments failed to provide resources or legislative frameworks and left it up to employers to determine if they needed to develop policies, training and procedures to address this problem.

Evidence

It was not until 2014, that a [national discussion](#) about the problem opened up, when the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women & Children and the Canadian Labour Congress released a [report](#) on the impacts of domestic violence on workers and the workplace. The results were clear; fully one third of Canadian workers have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime. For over half of them, that violence followed them to work.

In 2015, the Conference Board of Canada [released another report](#) that was shocking to many: 71% of Canadian employers surveyed reported that they had been in a situation where they felt it was necessary to protect a victim of domestic abuse. Despite their willingness to be supportive, many employers were not trained on how to respond safely and effectively to those workers at risk, prompting the Conference Board to recommend more training and education for employers.

82% of those who had experienced domestic violence said it negatively impacted their ability to do their job.

Almost **40%** of those said the violence kept them from getting to work.

Almost **10%** said they lost their jobs because of it.

Advocacy and Legislative Changes

With evidence about the wide-reaching impacts of domestic violence on workplaces in hand, advocates and unions began lobbying governments to respond. Thanks to their efforts, every province in Canada, the North West Territories and the federal government have made changes to labour legislation to provide leave for employees who experience domestic violence. The

specific amount of leave available to workers varies, but all jurisdictions except for Saskatchewan provide between 3 and 5 days of paid leave. Each jurisdiction provides additional days of unpaid leave. Domestic violence leave helps people experiencing violence take the time they need to seek support and, if they choose, to leave an abusive relationship. When paid leave is included, it relieves financial burdens on those who otherwise cannot afford to be missing work.

Other provinces have begun to follow Ontario's lead in naming domestic violence as a workplace hazard in Occupational Health and Safety legislation or regulations. Alberta, New Brunswick and Newfoundland have all identified domestic violence or family violence as workplace hazards and placed responsibilities on employers to mitigate the risks posed by this type of violence. The Federal Government is currently working on regulations for the Canada Labour Code that are expected to do the same.

The Canadian Labour Congress has created a map to track these legislative changes.



View Domestic Violence Legislation Comparison Map:

http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/sites/neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/files/Web_Map_EN.pdf

To be effective, laws need to be complemented by comprehensive policies and practical measures that tackle the root causes of domestic violence. Workplace policies need to take into consideration the unique aspects of the problem. Domestic violence involves persistent behaviours and may result in a chronic pattern of crises where co-workers and management blame the victim for having brought the violence into the workplace. Because we are still fighting the perception that domestic violence is primarily a personal problem victims or co-workers may feel ambivalent or hesitant about disclosing safety concerns. This points to the critical need for workplace education programs to help supervisors and co-workers understand the dynamics of domestic violence, to recognize warning signs and signs that a situation is becoming more dangerous, and to prepare them to respond supportively to disclosures of domestic violence.

The Way Forward

The past 20 years have seen extremely rapid change in the way that domestic violence is viewed by and within workplaces. The labour movement in Canada has played a [leadership role](#). Unions are educating their members, offering support to members when they need it and they are negotiating paid leave and other supports through collective bargaining. Domestic violence advocates are working to support employers when they need help with risk assessment and safety planning. The Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children has developed [training for employers](#).

A growing [body of research](#) makes it clear that workplaces have important opportunities to support victims of domestic violence, improve productivity and ensure safety for the entire workplace. They can also play a critical role in holding perpetrators of domestic violence accountable through [proactive polices](#).

The challenge that lies ahead is where to focus efforts and how to work collaboratively to make the best possible use of opportunities to reduce domestic violence, and its impacts, in workplaces and beyond.

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