Workshop urges Memphis-area employers to join struggle against domestic violence

By Kevin McKenzie

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Last April, a woman arriving to work at ServiceMaster in East Memphis was slain in the parking lot by her husband, who then took his life while co-workers watched.

About the same time, a woman working for First Horizon urgently needed medical care at her home and though her life was in danger, but her husband denied her care. She was saved when concerned co-workers ultimately triggered a home visit by Memphis police.

Panelists at a workshop highlighting the need for domestic violence awareness and policies for Memphis-area employers on Thursday used statistics, warnings of legal liability ranging from $1 million to $40 million and real-world examples to support the point.

The workshop was designed to kick off a domestic violence in the workplace campaign, built around online resources that companies can tap. A University of Memphis associate professor, Carol Danehower summed it up in three words: "Recognize, respond, refer."

Danehower, who teaches human resources at the Fogelman College of Business and Economics, and Deborah Clubb, executive director of the Memphis Area Women's Council, created the campaign. The launch, during Domestic Violence Awareness Month, caps a three-year effort fueled in part by a federal grant, Clubb said.

Linda Carter, senior director of diversity and inclusivity for ServiceMaster, a residential and commercial service provider with companies including Terminix and TruGreen, described steps the company has taken since an associate, 43-year-old Laura Deborah Rowberry, was fatally shot in a Ridge Lake Blvd. parking lot on April 10 by her husband, Thomas Rowberry, 51.

Carter told an audience of about 60 people at the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis in Midtown that ServiceMaster provided a lot of grief counseling; many employees witnessed the murder-suicide in April. Security was tightened, including more patrolling, badge access to and within buildings and parking lot escorts are available for those working early and late.

Recognizing signs and addressing the issue before it gets to work is the best
precaution, Carter said.

Linda Bacon, senior vice president of human resources and risk compliance for First Tennessee, provided an example of a family-friendly banking concern deeply involved in combating domestic violence. Those efforts include checking employee emails, already monitored for security and other reasons, for indications of threats and harassment and anonymous tips from a "my safe workplace" hotline.

Bacon said an employee's call that she would miss work because of a miscarriage last April or May led to actions by co-workers to contact hospitals, her doctor and for one to go to her home, where her husband said she wasn't available. On the advice of company security, Memphis police were called and found the woman in her bedroom. She required a week on a ventilator to recover and credited her co-workers with saving her life, Bacon said.

One attorney who represents employers, Robbin Hutton with Jackson Lewis, described the legal liabilities and Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements that make domestic violence policies wise and cost effective and recommended employee assistance programs.

"It's 100 times more expensive to respond than to have a plan in place," Hutton said.

An attorney who helps abuse victims obtain civil orders of protection, Shayla Purifoy of Memphis Area Legal Services, also advised employers to have zero tolerance for domestic violence, but recommended more understanding for victims.

"The last thing you want to do is give the abuser power by firing that person," Purifoy said.

With 24 domestic violence homicides in Memphis through Oct. 19, compared to 19 for the same period last year, Memphis police Lt. Doreen Shelton urged employers to use the advice given Thursday, "and utilize us," she said.

**Workplace campaigns against domestic violence**

A "Violence at Home, Victims at Work" campaign seeing to engage Memphis-area employers in the fight against domestic violence recommends these websites for information, models and materials:

**EraseDomesticCrime.com** — Maintained by the Memphis Area Women’s Council on behalf of the Erase Domestic Crime Collaborative. Includes a handbook, palm card, local video, poster and other information about what employers can do. The site will announce information later about free sessions planned for January through June.

**WorkplacesRespond.org** — A National Resource Center project funded by the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women.

**caepv.org** — Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence, a national nonprofit membership organization based in Illinois.