



DOZEN WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Attorney Elicia Spearman spearheads 'forward-looking' Aetna safety campaign

By EUGENE DRISCOLL

It is the modern worker's nightmare. A person with a weapon walks into your office, obviously intending to do harm. What do you do?

Hide? Call 911? Confront the intruder? What's your employer's advice?

Have your supervisors even broached the subject, beyond a letter tacked to the bulletin board, next to the coffee machine, signed by your "safety committee?"

They've more than broached the subject at Aetna, the Hartford-based insurance giant that employs 7,800 people in Connecticut alone. The company rolled out a new workplace and domestic violence policy in October that incorporates a number of Web-based features — including an instant messenger service connected directly to the company's security staff.

Elicia Pegues Spearman is an attorney who was an in-house counsel for the company before being named Aetna's head of employee relations in 2006.

She spearheaded Aetna's workplace and domestic violence initiative, a group of Aetna workers who spent about four months examining and retooling the company's workplace and domestic violence policy.

"Looking at the world we live in today, there have been a rising number of school and workplace violence incidents," Spearman said. "We've been very fortunate at Aetna not to have any of those incidents, but Aetna employees are encouraged to be forward thinking and proactive."

The "forward thinking" and "proactive" part is why Spearman didn't simply procure the services offered by hundreds of third-party companies that advise corporate American on how to promote a safe workplace — for a price.

Instead, Spearman gathered representatives from several Aetna departments — a "cross-functional team," she called it. The team assumed workplace violence and domestic violence are connected. Why?

Because research shows, unfortunately, that workplace violence can start in the homes and private lives of the employees and then spill over, sometimes tragically, into the office. Statistics show a staggering 1.3 million women per year in the U.S. are assaulted by intimate partners, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, along with 835,000 men.

A U.S. Department of Justice study of violent workplace incidents between 1993 and 1999 showed that about 1 percent of the 1.7 million acts of workplace violence were committed by a former or current spouse.

Meanwhile, 50 percent of female domestic violence victims are harassed at work by the man or women committing the physical abuse, according to a report from the U.S. General Accounting Office.

Want more proof? A 2004 study in Maine

showed that 74 percent of people who have committed domestic violence said they had easy access to their victim's workplace. Some 21 percent said they contacted their victim at work, even after receiving a "no contact" order. Links to the studies listed above are readily available on the Web site of the American Bar Association.

"Domestic violence is really not talked about in corporate America," Spearman said. "However, when you do have domestic violence incidents, a lot of them spill over into the workplace. If they want to try to get a spouse, they can come to the workplace to try to damage their property or to get that spouse, so I don't think domestic violence is something that can be ignored."

Instant Messaging

One innovative feature of the new Aetna policy is a feature that allows employees to send instant messages to Aetna corporate security personnel, who can then contact police or other emergency personnel, if necessary. If an Aetna employee is being battered in her home, the messenger feature allows the employee to instantly ask for help in an emergency — discreetly.

"They could use this feature via their keyboard, versus having to pick up a phone while the incident is happening," Spearman said. "If I'm a victim of workplace violence or the victim of domestic violence, perhaps I don't want to pick up the phone because I might get hurt," she said.

While the instant messenger service was born out of the workplace and domestic violence initiative, Aetna employees have used it twice to instantly alert security about minor emergencies. The first time was when an employee suffered a hand injury; the second time was when a few employees were stuck in an elevator.

"We want people to dial 911, obviously, if they can, when there is an immediate threat," Spearman said. "But if you can't pick up a phone, this is a feature that is innovative. It is something I have not seen any company do."

Spearman's team also developed a training course, which it made available to Aetna managers. The 60-minute program focuses on workplace and domestic violence — everything from what it is to how to help. One goal is to put the issue in the front of managers' minds. "We're saying if this happens, here are some things you might want to do," Spearman said.

The team also rewrote parts of the company's written policy and created a section of the "Working at Aetna" web site that deals with workplace and domestic violence.

It includes information for employees seeking help with the issue.

Spearman, who was born in Connecticut, has been working at Aetna since April 2001.

Prior to coming to Aetna, Spearman was an associate general counsel in the legal department at Children's Hospital in



Elicia Spearman headed a team that spent four months examining and retooling Aetna policies to better help employees who were being abused in the home or the workplace.

Washington, D.C.

From 1995 to 1998, Spearman worked as an attorney for the FBI, in the employment litigation unit, where she specialized in employment discrimination matters, defending individual and class-action lawsuits.

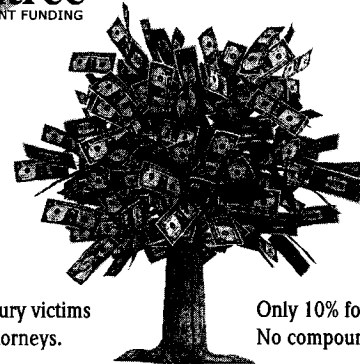
She is a graduate of Wellesley University and received her law degree from Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Ohio.

She lives in Cheshire with her husband, Livie, and their daughter, Kaila Cheryl.

Spearman said she has enjoyed making the transition from the legal staff into the human resources field. "I was always putting out fires and being reactive" as an in-house counsel, she said. "This gives me a chance to see the other side of the table and to be in front of problems."

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