DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A WORKPLACE RESPONSE

Mythiley Iyer
Domestic Violence Resource Centre

and

Betty Taylor
Domestic Violence Service, Gold Coast
Queensland, Australia

Paper presented at the conference Partnerships in Crime Prevention, convened jointly by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime and held in Hobart, 25-27 February 1998
**Introduction**

It is well noted that domestic violence is a serious crime in Australia today. So much has been done over the past decade to lift the veil of secrecy and silence that has, for so long, kept domestic abuse hidden within our homes and our communities.

However, putting domestic violence on the agenda has not necessarily resulted in the "shedding of the shame" for many Australian women. The stigma, the bruises, the abuse, the threats are often her constant companion. They accompany her into environments that are supportive and healing but they also accompany her into environments that are blaming and dis-empowering.

The vast majority of Australian women spend some time each week in paid employment. So many abused women are working women and the workplace may not always be a sanctuary as threats, harassment, stalking and violence follow them to work. Violence in the home can also impact on the workplace through employee absenteeism, stress, lost productivity, staff turnover and sometimes workplace violence.

Victims of domestic violence need a workplace that responds to their needs. Supportive work environments allow victims of domestic abuse to feel they have a place to go to that is safe and where helpful resources are available.

Through the initiative outlined in this paper, corporations and businesses are being encouraged to develop policies and programs that are responsive to the particular needs of abused women.

**The Workplace Initiative: Framework**

An initiative which focussed on workplace responses to domestic abuse was developed by the Domestic Violence Service, Gold Coast and the Domestic Violence Resource Centre in 1997.

The aim of the initiative is to involve the corporate and business sector in the struggle against domestic violence and make their workplaces more responsive to the needs of victims of domestic violence.

To date in Queensland, involvement of the corporate and business sectors in domestic violence initiatives had primarily focussed on donations or sponsorship to community based projects.

Nothing had previously been done to engage employers to play a more direct role in responding to domestic violence.

**Workplace Initiative: Implementation**

To move the idea of "Domestic Violence: A Workplace Initiative" from concept to realisation we, as members of a Ministerial Advisory body to the Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care, the Queensland Domestic Violence Council developed the concept for statewide application.

The project was developed in conjunction with Domestic Violence Prevention Week 97 to provide a launching pad as well as facilitate the participation of both community-based agencies
as well as the government, and provide some impetus towards the participation of the corporate sector.

A phased approach was designed to develop the project.

**Phase 1**
On behalf of the Queensland Domestic Violence Council, we wrote to more than 100 businesses listed in the Queensland Top Business Guide, the Queensland Government as the State's largest employer, various local government authorities and the Australian Council of Trade Unions. Broadly, the letter referred to the objectives of Domestic Violence Prevention Week and introduced domestic violence as an issue which not affected people employed in these organisations, but which also had implications on any organisation's overall productivity. The letter invited organisations to contact should they be interested in pursuing these issues further.

We must admit that it was with some anxiety that we awaited the response from those organisations contacted; whilst we believed the project had great potential, our shared past experience with the corporate sector in Queensland with regard to domestic violence was less than enthusiastic. And we not wrong when the first few letters streamed in - in the negative. Some of the organisations, which shall remain nameless either indicated that their dollars set aside for benevolent works had been targeted, or that domestic violence was not really a concern within their organisation.

Then we received a letter in the affirmative, soon to be followed by some 25 others. We followed-up on these through direct telephone contact, and were pleasantly surprised at the enthusiasm of those who wished to participate in the project.

Respondents, broadly fell into two groups, those who wished to be sent information materials which they could promote throughout their workplaces during DVPW 97 and those who indicated that they would like to explore the manner in which this project could be developed within their organisations.

**Phase 2**
We were now into phase 2 of the project; meetings were set-up with key personnel of seven agencies. They were Tricare, BHP Coal, Boral Energy, TAB, Royal Brisbane Hospital, The Body Shops and Dreamworld. The Australian Council of Trade Unions also responded in the affirmative and sought to support the project through their links in industry.

It was clear from many of these meetings that a number of these interested organisations had to some extent been involved in progressive human resource policies such as the institution of sexual harassment procedures; whilst others at the very least felt that the intrusion of domestic violence into the workplace and the threats posed fell within the frameworks of Workplace Health and Safety.

We found that the organisations were keen to pursue, with our support, the development of workplace policies on domestic violence. We were able to explore with them policy ideals which not only facilitated the availability of information on domestic violence in the workplaces and the possibility of the organisations making an organisational statement about the criminality of
domestic violence in the community, but also the development of human resource and industrial policies which assisted with the organisation responding directly to individual cases of domestic violence. Some of the ideas considered were flexible leave provisions, time-off to attend court processes, private space where women could safely make contact with support services and the provision of security services to women who were being stalked or harassed at work.

The meeting outcomes also fell broadly into two streams: the first were organisations which were keen to actively promote that domestic violence was unacceptable through visible availability of information, as well as promoting the organisations' position through articles in their organisational newsletters and such like. Whilst they were supportive of the idea of developing policies, they wished to give further consideration to how this might be effected through their organisational structures.

The second group wished to pursue the development of policy and procedure, and were more than enthusiastic for us to be involved directly in their organisations.

**Phase 3**
With the approval of the QDVC, both of us approached our respective employer organisations for support.

We had also to develop a strategic direction in which our energies would be best maximised given the interest in the project as well as ensure applicability across Queensland. We were of the position that the project as a Statewide initiative would more likely benefit from the development of resources which would enable a "self-help" model within employer groups, with strategic support from any domestic violence services.

This direction was enthusiastically accepted by participating corporate organisations.

As a next step, with resources from our agencies, we developed the "Domestic Violence: A Workplace Response" Resource Kit comprising 13 Factsheets ranging from a definition of domestic violence, identifying victims and abusers, the leadership role open the employers in defining domestic violence as a crime to developing human resource management and industrial policies in response to domestic violence in workplaces, particularly from a crime prevention angle. Policy directions recommended covered issues for the presence of both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence in workplaces.

In the meantime, the seven participating corporate organisations spear-headed various information and promotional strategies as well as set about exploring infrastructure to enable the development of appropriate policy and commissioning training.

On May 31 1997 during Domestic Violence Prevention Week, Her Excellency Leneen Forde, Governor of Queensland launched the "Domestic Violence: A Workplace Response" Initiative. The public event included the award of certificates of commendation to the participating corporate organisations by Her Excellency.

A training program developed in conjunction with the Resource Kit has also been piloted in Queensland. The program is mainly designed to train key human resource support staff in
agencies to identify and respond appropriately to both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence as well as take an instrumental role in leading the development of domestic violence crime prevention policy. The training also provides some domestic violence impact assessment criteria for other policies which are already in operation in the agencies.

**Future Directions**

Further resources are required to progress the pilot training program, as one of the identified needs from the pilot was the requirement for a video to accompany the training program. This is considered to be of significance to enable the application of the project across Queensland.

As such, it was with enthusiasm that we welcomed the "Businesses Against Domestic Violence" project which the Prime Minister launched in November last year. We immediately made contact with relevant departmental officers. Consequently a meeting was held with the Project Manager and some interest has been shown by "Businesses Against Domestic Violence" in re-producing the Resource Kit for distribution nationally.

We believe the "Domestic Violence: A Workplace Response" project has the capacity to draw together not only corporate and business sectors but all levels of employer groups, including government into playing a key role in responding to domestic violence. We believe that projects such as this provide opportunities for the broader community to move beyond benevolent activities to actually inculcating strategies within their own organisations in responding to domestic violence.