

A workplace approach to addressing domestic and family violence

The NSW Government provides support for employees experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV), such as by offering 20 days of paid leave each calendar year and providing flexible working arrangements. However, the former Housing and Property Group at the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) found there had been minimal uptake of paid DFV leave. To better understand why, it formed a team to investigate the issue.

The team surveyed employees within the Housing and Property Group to find out what they knew about available DFV support. The results showed that 80% of employees did not openly discuss issues concerning DFV in their workplace and 90% were interested in learning how to support colleagues experiencing DFV. The team saw this as an opportunity to increase access to support for employees experiencing DFV and to bring more awareness to the issue, presenting it as something everyone can play a part in addressing.

The team acknowledged that the risks of failing to provide accessible DFV support to employees include:

- negative impacts on physical and mental health
- a potential decrease in the quality and/or timely completion of work
- increased absenteeism
- people becoming removed from the workforce and losing their financial independence
- increased exposure to perpetrators of abuse
- a continuation of the cycle of abuse.

The team sought and received funding and support from the DPE leadership team to implement initiatives across four key areas: support, education, culture and compliance.

The DPE's primary focus was to provide sufficient and appropriate supports for any employees experiencing DFV. It achieved this by:

- reviewing and updating its DFV policy, including leave entitlements, to give all employees the same entitlements
- streamlining approvals for DFV leave by removing the requirement for evidence and allowing manager discretion

- training managers in ways to adapt work duties to support employees experiencing DFV
- being flexible during pandemic-induced work-from-home periods and exempting employees who were unsafe at home and allowing them to go into workplaces
- providing all employees with Employee Assistance Program (EAP) details and a comprehensive list of DFV service providers.

The team developed clear guidelines and information to help employees recognise DFV and support colleagues experiencing it delivered through men’s toolbox talks, online training, webinars and fact sheets. The online training component has been completed by more than 1,400 employees through the MyCareer online talent management system. There is an expectation that eventually all DPE employees will complete this training. The next phase of education will cover the topic of healthy relationships and will include specialised courses for managers, to be implemented in the 2022/2023 financial year.

The team also worked to create a culture where DFV is openly talked about to remove the stigma surrounding it. They developed social media campaigns focused on recognising DFV, removing the shame in taking DFV leave, and calling out unacceptable behaviour. These social media videos featured DPE leaders and reached over 5,000 employees.

An important element of this work was ensuring that the DPE continuously works toward the guaranteed safety and wellbeing of its employees. This included reviewing DPE-provided equipment and resources to ensure none can be used to perpetrate violence. It also involved educating managers and employees on how to address non-compliance in relation to the use of DPE resources. DPE’s Code of Conduct has been updated to explicitly reflect the fact that equipment cannot be used to abuse, harass, or intimidate. The DPE also worked with building security personnel to conduct safety audits of all buildings.

The clearest indicator of the success of this work to increase awareness of DFV and the accessibility of the support services is that there has been a fivefold increase in the number of employees accessing DFV leave. Increased education on the issue has given DPE employees experiencing DFV the confidence to disclose their circumstances. Some have also given feedback that they felt comfortable disclosing their DFV challenges to colleagues and managers, as they knew the working environment was a safe space.

Support has now been rolled out across the DPE. The DFV project was designed to be transferrable, and the initiatives developed under each of the four target areas can be implemented in any agency. With minor amendments it could be used by other employers outside the sector too.

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