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No tolerance for bullying, experts say

By Marcia Heroux Pounds, Sun Sentinel

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Bullying in the workplace happens at all levels and in many different workplaces, even to 6-foot, 200-lb. Miami Dolphins football players, experts said at a conference Thursday in Deerfield Beach.

The [Broward County](#) Crime Commission gathered local and national experts to talk about adult and workplace bullying.

"When you have zero tolerance, employees understand, 'we don't want to get near that locker room mentality that the Dolphins had,' " said Jack Seiler, mayor of Fort Lauderdale, referring to Dolphins linemen's vulgar text messages, voice mails and behavior that prompted teammate Jonathan Martin to quit the team last year.

The city has a zero-tolerance policy against bullying, Seiler said.

But 27 percent of U.S. workers have been bullied and 21 percent have witnessed bullying in the workplace, according to a 2014 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute. Workplace bullying is defined as repeated mistreatment; abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating or intimidating; work sabotage; or verbal abuse.

Nearly 70 percent of bullies are male and 31 percent female, according to the Institute.

Improved economic conditions in the country have not lessened the bullying, said Gary Namie, research director of the Workplace Bullying Institute. Victims may be ostracized in the workplace and set up for errors, he said.

"I'm going to add to your job and not give you training and then call you 'stupid,' " he said as an example of a bully boss.

While many bills have been floated, including in Florida's state legislature, none have passed to take action against workplace bullying.

"Once management understands what the costs of bullying are, they'll get it," said Kelly Kolb, a labor lawyer for Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney in Fort Lauderdale.

Research has shown that bullying can result in "clinical depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, ulcers, loss of sleep, a variety of problems. That's going to translate into absenteeism, loss of productivity, more sick days, workers comp claims, health insurance claims, short- and long-term disability claims," Kolb said.

"Productivity is going down, expenses are going up, all because of this, usually one male, individual," he said.

Maureen Duffy, a workplace consultant and family therapist in South Florida, said once a person is targeted for bullying, it doesn't always end after the person is fired or quits.

"They get tracked down at their new employment, anonymous phone calls saying, why did you hire this person?," Duffy said. The former employer may withhold references when the person is trying to get a new job, she said.

Sometimes, the situation is even worse. Conference attendees heard from the mother and sister of Jodie Jones Zebell, a 31-year-old mammographer who took her own life after feeling bullied at work.

"Even if something seems trivial, it adds up," said her sister Joie Bostwick. "Listen, and make sure they know how much you love them."

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