



# Supervisor Newsletter

## Opioid Epidemic Impact Worsens

According to a survey conducted by the National Safety Council, more than 70% of American companies are now facing problems caused by the direct impact of prescription drug misuse and opioid abuse in the workplace, and 75% of adults struggling with a substance abuse disorder are in the workforce.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that deaths from drug and alcohol overdoses at work rose more than 30% in 2016, and overdose fatalities have increased by 25% annually over the past seven years.

Numerous surveys have found that problems in employees' personal lives negatively impact their work performance. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 20% of employees have personal problems that reduce their productivity by up to 25%. As a result of the opioid epidemic in America, many employees are experiencing substance abuse problems within their family that negatively impact their work life.

Healthcare costs for workers that abuse prescription drugs are three times the costs for an average employee.

On average, 2 million working-age Americans are not in the labor force annually as a result of their addiction to opioids, a \$1.6 trillion cost to the U.S. economy, according to an American Action Forum study.

An analysis released by Altarum, a nonprofit health research and consulting institute, found that the cost of the country's opioid crisis is estimated to have exceeded \$1 trillion from 2001 to

2018, and is projected to cost an additional \$500 billion by 2020.

This figure is largely made up of lost wages of workers and productivity losses of employers. The greatest cost comes from lost earnings and productivity from overdose deaths—estimated at \$800,000 per person based on an average age of 41 among overdose victims.

The negative impact of the opioid epidemic on American businesses is undeniable. Employers must take action to protect their company and their workers. Taking steps to address opioids in the workplace now could make all the difference in the future.

## Business Response

Addressing prescription drug abuse at work helps cut costs and protect worker safety, which is of course imperative. But reducing the human cost—the emotional toll on individuals with a use disorder, and that on their families and communities—is substantially more important.

So, what is a company's best response? The most effective ways to prevent prescription drug abuse at work are through a strong substance abuse policy, a comprehensive drug testing program, and information and education for employees informing them of the dangers of Rx and opioid drug abuse.

Another important tool in the employer's arsenal is supervisor training. Managers should be taught to recognize drug abuse indicators and to intervene before drug abuse at work results in a workplace accident or overdose. Supervisors must learn to recognize and respond to prescription

drug abuse issues so that problems can be addressed in uniform, cost-effective, and business-sensitive ways.

Drug testing is critically important but should not be relied on exclusively. Not all prescription drugs show up on a workplace drug test. Therefore, it is important for supervisors to be able to recognize when an employee is impaired and to know the appropriate action to take in each situation.

Three key indicators that an employee may be impaired are:

1. When an employee has to put extra effort into completing simple day-to-day tasks.
2. When performance is compromised.
3. When an employee appears to care less about the quality of his or her work.

Indicators of being under the influence of a narcotic painkiller are:

- Slowed reflexes
- Low, slow, raspy speech
- Facial itching
- Dry mouth
- Euphoria
- Pupils visibly and obviously constricted
- Flaccid muscle tone

When an individual who is in pain is abusing and/or addicted to pain medication, treatment is required for the person to get well.

However, supervisors are not expected to act as trained clinicians or counselors. Even highly trained medical and treatment professionals have difficulty evaluating patients with the dual problem of pain and addiction.

When individuals are suffering from pain and have become addicted to their medication, treating these disorders as separate entities misses the complexity of the individual. Add to this the potential problems of other psychiatric and mental issues, and it becomes obvious that dealing with employees who are abusing their medication is a complex problem.

It is crucial, then, that employees with pain and addiction problems get the qualified help they need. This is why it is so important to refer employees with these types of problems to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for evaluation and treatment.

EAP programs can help people get treatment that is based on an integrative, multi-dimensional pharmacobehavioral model that treats the underlying pain using alternatives to opioid drugs, while helping the patient to overcome the addiction.

EAPs are not expensive. They cost on average about \$12 to \$40 per employee each year, and companies save more than they spend. For every \$1 invested in an EAP, employers can expect a return on investment of \$3 to \$6.

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