

The Opioid Crisis and Connecticut's Workforce



Updating Your Approach to Employees Suffering from Addiction Can Preserve Your Greatest Resource



The Opioid Crisis and its Impact on Connecticut Employers

The current opioid crisis has had a far reaching effect on all aspects of American society, including employers. In 2015, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimated 21.7 million adults needed substance abuse treatment and many of those adults were workers struggling to maintain their employment status and financial livelihoods.

The most recent data from the National Safety Council reveal that, while 70% of employers report being negatively impacted by prescription drug misuse, and just as many feel strongly about helping their employees return to work after substance abuse treatment, approximately 80% of employers lack a comprehensive workplace substance use policy, and a similar percentage lack training on identifying substance abuse in their workplaces.

Substance use and abuse has been increasing at a drastic rate in the US in recent years, fueled by the over-prescribing and overuse/ misuse of prescription opioid medications.

Employers have seen a 20% reduction in labor force participation by 25 to 54 year old men over the past 16 years, and the potential costs to employers and their workforce going forward could be even more significant.

To mitigate the negative effects of the opioid crisis on the health and stability of the workforce, employers should make a commitment to offer assistance to employees and families who are struggling with addiction, provide company-wide substance abuse education, and implement policies and risk-reduction efforts to protect the health and productivity of their workforce. A new, more compassionate approach to addiction in the workplace, based on the most current research, can save Connecticut employers millions of dollars per year in lost productivity, days away from work, increased healthcare costs, human resources activities, and other resource expenditures.



Over a two-year period, the Connecticut Department of Public Health's Occupational Health Program organized a series of conferences with stakeholders to develop a multifaceted understanding of the current substance abuse crisis in our state and across the country, including the biological and psychological basis of addiction, the broad range of societal impacts, the costs associated with addiction to employers and workers, and the current structure and effectiveness of workplace drug use policies. Through the information learned and ideas exchanged during these conferences, and the work of key stakeholders in the months that followed, a set of recommendations were developed that outlines a more progressive, disease-based approach to employee addiction and substance use policy development.

A NEW APPROACH TO ADDICTION IN THE WORKPLACE

Historically, employers have been encouraged to use broad punitive measures as a method for preventing substance abuse by employees and contractors, such as “drug-free workplace” and “zero-tolerance” policies. Decades of research on these policies though have shown that they can ultimately exacerbate worker addiction issues by villainizing individuals and encouraging the addicted worker to keep their disease hidden, rather than seeking the help they need.

Addiction has often been viewed as a personal weakness or personality flaw. However, the scientific understanding of addiction has shown that it is actually a reoccurring chronic disease, like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Much like other diseases, addiction is caused by a combination of behavioral, environmental, and biological factors that result in varying levels of predisposition to, and detrimental effects of, the disease state, in this case compulsive drug seeking in the face of persistent and increasing negative effects.

With that in mind, existing punitive workplace substance use policies are known to be at best outdated and at worst exacerbating workplace addiction issues.

Employers should take steps to update their workplace substance use policies away from those designed to stigmatize and punish addiction as a choice and toward those that offer help to struggling workers and their families. Those policies should include company-wide directives and procedures for

1. **Early Identification** of workers who may be experiencing or at risk for addiction
2. **Instant Support** for counseling and treatment of affected workers and their families
3. **Employer Flexibility** with respect to time off for medical appointments, light duty, and return-to-work
4. **Regular Review** of progress toward recovery and adjustment to reentry into the workplace
5. **Enlisting Success** by tapping into the knowledge and experience of employees who have navigated similar struggles

Employers must recognize that the opioid crisis is having a negative impact on workers, workplace stability, and their bottom line, and that no industry, level of education, professional credential, or pay grade is immune to its destruction. Employers in industries such as construction, entertainment, recreation, and food service

should be aware that their employees have twice the national average of substance abuse disorders. Odds are that a worker struggling with opioid dependence or other substance misuse disorder is struggling in silence. It is often said that employees are a company's most valuable asset. To be true to that, companies should revise their workplace substance use policies to shift the focus from stigmatization to an emphasis on support and care. Only then will we be better prepared to face the growing opioid crisis that is likely to continue to impact our workplaces in the short-term and quite possibly beyond.



Working together to save lives and livelihoods.



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**Website link to the white paper,
brochure, and conference materials
<https://portal.ct.gov/opioidsworkplace>**