

A Safe Workplace is a Drug-Free Workplace

By Elena Carr and Dr. Don Wright

The majority of individuals who abuse alcohol and other drugs are employed, creating significant but avoidable safety and health hazards in the nation's workplaces.

Small businesses in particular have big disadvantages when it comes to substance abuse. Because they are less likely than larger companies to have programs in place to combat it, they may be more likely to employ drug users—and the cost of just one accident caused by an impaired employee can devastate a small business.

The good news is that small business owners can protect their companies and help reduce substance abuse in their communities by implementing workplace prevention programs that educate employees about its dangers and encouraging individuals with related problems to seek help.

Although not required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), drug-free workplace programs are natural complements to other initiatives that help ensure safe and healthy workplaces and add value to America's businesses and communities. Such programs help reduce occupational injuries and illnesses and send a clear signal that employers care about their employees.

A comprehensive drug-free workplace program generally includes five components: a written policy, supervisor training, employee education, employee assistance and drug testing. Although employers may choose not to include all five, it is recommended that all be explored when developing a program.

Written Policy

A written policy is the foundation of a drug-free workplace. Every organization's policy should be tailored to meet its specific needs; however, all effective policies have some aspects in common, including why the policy is being implemented, a clear description of prohibited behaviors, and an explanation of the consequences for violating the policy. Sharing all policies with all employees is essential for success; therefore, employers should be certain that all employees are aware of their drug-free workplace policy and program.

Supervisor Training

After developing a policy, an organization should train those individuals closest to its workforce—supervisors. Training should ensure that supervisors understand the drug-free workplace policy, ways to recognize and deal with employees who have performance problems that may be related to substance abuse and how to refer employees to available assistance or for drug testing as appropriate.

Supervisors' responsibilities should include monitoring performance, staying alert to and documenting performance problems and enforcing the policy. Supervisors should not, however, be expected to diagnose substance abuse problems or provide counseling to employees who may have them. If supervisors are responsible for

making referrals for drug testing based on reasonable suspicion, they also must be specifically trained on how to make that determination.

Employee Education

A drug and alcohol education program provides employees with information they need to cooperate with and benefit from a drug-free workplace program. Effective programs provide company-specific information, such as the details of the company's policy, as well as general information about the nature of addiction; its impact on work performance, health and personal life; and help available for related problems. All employees should participate, and the message should be delivered on an ongoing basis through a variety of means, such as home mailings, displays, brown-bag lunches, guest speakers and sessions at new employee orientation.

Employee Assistance

A critical component of a drug-free workplace is providing assistance to employees who have problems with alcohol and other drugs. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are worksite programs that provide problem identification, assessment and referral services for employees. They are effective vehicles for addressing poor performance that may stem from an employee's personal problems, including substance abuse.

EAPs benefit employees and clearly demonstrate employers' respect for their staff. They also offer an alternative to dismissal and minimize employers' legal vulnerability by demonstrating efforts to support employees. In addition to counseling and referrals, many EAPs offer services such as supervisor training and employee education.

At a minimum, businesses should maintain a resource file from which employees can access information about community-based resources, treatment programs and helplines.

Drug Testing

Some employers decide to drug test for a variety of reasons, such as deterring and detecting drug use, as well as providing concrete evidence for intervention, referral to treatment and/or disciplinary action. Before deciding to test, employers must consider certain factors, such as who will be tested, which drugs will be tested for and when and how tests will be conducted. They must also be familiar with any state and Federal laws (such as the Department of Transportation's drug- and alcohol-testing regulations for employees in safety-sensitive positions) or collective bargaining agreements that may impact when, where and how testing is performed. It is strongly recommended that legal counsel be sought before starting a testing program.

Drug-Free Workplace Resources

The Department of Labor's Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace program and OSHA encourage small businesses to maintain safe, healthy and drug-free workplaces and offer a number of online tools to help them do so.

The Working Partners Web site (www.dol.gov/workingpartners) is a central source of information about workplace drug and alcohol issues and strategies for addressing them. For example, businesses needing to develop a drug-free workplace policy from scratch can use the site's Drug-Free Workplace Advisor Program Builder, which will guide them through the different elements of a comprehensive policy and then generate a policy statement based on their selections.

Another site feature, the Substance Abuse Information Database (SAID), is an online repository of hundreds of documents related to workplace alcohol and drug abuse, including sample policies, surveys reports, training and educational materials, and legal and regulatory information.

The site also has information about related state laws, community-based organizations that may assist businesses in becoming drug free and helplines that can assist individuals who have alcohol or drug problems. Presentations, fact sheets and articles that can be used for supervisor training and employee education purposes also are available.

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OSHA and NFIB recently formed an Alliance to enhance safety and health throughout the nation's small and independent businesses. As part of this Alliance, they will work together to communicate with small businesses about how they can protect their workplaces from the hazards of alcohol and drug abuse.