

When Safety is Your Business: United Fire Equipment Company's Drug-Free Workplace Program

An Arizona-based fire safety company has discovered the benefits of being drug free and is taking steps to encourage other small businesses to follow suit.

United Fire Equipment Company President Daniel Matlick considers his company's drug-free workplace policy a key component of overall efforts to ensure the highest standards of workplace safety and customer service. In fact, his business is built on safety and service. Family-owned and operated since 1968, United Fire is an equipment and service supplier to those charged with protecting the safety of communities. It provides and maintains fire extinguishers, fire department equipment, basic life safety equipment, fire suppression systems and water sprinkler systems. It also has a fire truck repair facility.

Matlick said it was a sense of responsibility that prompted United Fire to develop its drug-free workplace policy. Safety is paramount, because the company serves the men and women that communities depend on in times of crisis. "We started the program for obvious reasons. We're in the life safety business, and we simply have to have a high level of integrity in our workforce," Matlick said. "We are an integral link in the chain of public safety."

At the core of United Fire's drug-free workplace policy is drug testing, specifically pre-employment screening and post accident. According to Matlick, both types of testing are effective prevention tools, with pre-employment screening helping to attract a higher caliber of employee and post accident serving as a deterrent to current employees. Matlick does not feel random testing is necessary, but said he would consider implementing it if an increase in accidents or injuries indicated a possible problem within the company.

All United Fire employees are informed of the drug-free workplace policy and procedures for reporting accidents and injuries during orientation. Matlick also educates employees about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse through informal means, such as bulletin boards and the company's intranet. Because many employees are parents, he also includes information about steps parents can take to help prevent youth substance abuse. These activities are part of a larger effort to be a family-friendly employer and encourage healthy lifestyles among employees. "I'm very much into health, safety and wellness, and this is all part of that," he said. Reflecting this dedication, United Fire's employee health plan includes coverage for treatment for substance use disorders.

There was little resistance when the policy was implemented ten years ago, and most employees recognize that it protects them as well as the company, Matlick said. At first, the policy was overseen by the company's combination comptroller/human resources director. Today it is administered by a dedicated HR director United Fire brought on board as a result of staff growth and the increased responsibilities that accompany it. In the last two decades, United Fire has expanded from eight employees to more than 60.

Matlick said the drug-free workplace program helps protect his investment in people. United Fire has its own custom built applications, and he estimates that it takes about one year for most people to be fully trained on them. "We're a unique business, so we spend a lot of time educating people. Few employees come to United Fire knowing our business," he said. "The policy prevents us from hiring someone who has an obvious drug and alcohol problem and investing a lot of time and money in them."

But Matlick emphasizes that the greatest benefits derived from drug-free workplace programs are not financial. Alcohol and drug abuse constitutes a serious workplace safety hazard that can lead to accidents, injuries and even death.

A certified firefighter and fire inspector himself, Matlick draws an analogy between fire safety and drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention. “Fire insurance cannot always protect a business as well as a good prevention program,” he said, noting that 43 percent of businesses that suffer a significant fire never reopen, and among the rest, 29 percent fail within three years. Likewise, the cost of just one accident caused by an employee impaired by alcohol or drugs can devastate a small business. According to Matlick, “It’s like an insurance policy, but it actually has the power to save a life.” “Insurance can’t ever replace a life, but by acting wisely, we can prevent one from ever being lost in the first place,” he said.

The Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and NFIB have established an alliance to enhance safety and health throughout the nation's small and independent businesses. As part of this alliance, they are working together, along with the Department of Labor’s Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace program, to communicate to small businesses ways they can protect their workplaces from the hazards of alcohol and drug abuse.

The Department of Labor’s Working Partners Web site and OSHA’s Workplace Substance Abuse topic page offer guidance for employers interested in developing drug-free workplace policies and learning about related issues.

- [DOL’s Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace Web site](#)
- [OSHA’s Workplace Substance Abuse topic page](#)