

Drug-Free Workplace Programs Foster Employment Success



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Substance Abuse and Employment Challenges

The link between unemployment and substance abuse creates a vicious cycle with one exacerbating the other. In today's labor force, 16 % of the unemployed report current illicit drug use and 9.1% of the unemployed report heavy alcohol use. The prevalence of substance abuse problems among welfare recipients is unknown, but estimates vary from 6.6% to 37%. It's not clear whether substance abuse leads to unemployment or vice versa, but it is clear that interventions are needed to help those in recovery acquire the necessary resources and support to go to work.

Those who suffer from drug and/or alcohol addiction face major obstacles to succeeding in life -- let alone in the workplace. Drug and/or alcohol addiction impedes one's ability to learn and to work. Unfortunately, because the disease is characterized by denial, many who need treatment do not request it. And, many involved in the welfare system fear that admitting they use drugs will jeopardize eligibility for assistance and may lead to losing custody of their children.

To really help welfare recipients and non-custodial parents of children receiving welfare to overcome addiction and increase their employment success requires an intensive, on-going, long-term commitment. Treatment is key to this effort in that it improves employment rates, raises income and enhances job performance. In a recent study, Florida reported a 76% increase in employment after treatment, and California reported a 60% increase. A Kansas State University study revealed that after treatment average monthly incomes increased 33 times and the number of days worked were 50% greater than in the month before treatment.

Welfare-to-Work Targets Those Needing Substance Abuse Treatment

Welfare-to-Work (WtW) has identified the need for substance abuse treatment as one eligibility factor and recognizes non-medical treatment as an example of an allowable job retention service. Using Federal WtW funds for non- medical substance abuse treatment is programmatically sound since it addresses the need of a particular target group and can help individuals make successful transitions to work.

Linking Recovery to Employment Success

Treatment may be necessary to enable individuals to benefit from job readiness activities -- but it alone may not be sufficient to ensure job retention. Maintaining recovery requires a sustained personal commitment and supportive social environments. Entering or re-entering the workplace brings numerous personal challenges and stressors which can trigger relapse. The good news is--more and more American workplaces have programs specifically designed to address workplace drug abuse.

What constitutes a Drug-Free Workplace (DFWP) Program?

- A written substance abuse policy that reflects the strong commitment of the employer to a workplace free of drug and alcohol abuse;
- Employee education and awareness that communicates the policy and focuses on the specific dangers of substance abuse on the job;
- Supervisory training on how to recognize signs of substance abuse based on job performance and guidance for intervening with and making appropriate referrals

- for substance abusing employees;
- An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to provide confidential problem identification, short-term counseling, referrals to treatment and follow-up services to help resolve employees' problems.
 - Drug testing to monitor policy compliance and minimize health and safety risks to others.

How can DFWP Programs help newly employed welfare recipients remain at work?

DFWP programs not only protect employers, but also provide opportunities for treatment and supportive services for those with substance abuse problems. DFWP programs can create an environment that fosters abstinence, provides social supports and facilitates access to additional help. A workplace which is "drug-free" is by far a better placement for someone in recovery than one where drug use goes unchecked. In addition, employers with DFWP programs may be more willing to hire former welfare recipients with substance abuse problems if they have mechanisms in place to respond to this issue.

How are DFWP program services generally financed?

The services are generally paid for by the employer. EAP services generally charge a flat fee regardless of how many employees actually use the services, and drug testing is paid for on a per test basis.

Do most employers have DFWP programs in place?

Although about 80% of large companies have some form of a DFWP program in place, far fewer small work organizations perform drug testing or offer EAP services. Fortunately, more and more small businesses are joining or forming consortia to purchase DFWP services.

Can WtW funds be used to make drug-free workplace (DFWP) services available to WtW participants?

Yes, where existing resources are not otherwise available to the participant. This means that if an employer already provides DFWP services, WtW funds cannot be used to provide these services to WtW participants. However, if DFWP services are not currently provided by the employer, WtW funds may be used to make such services available to WtW participants but other funds must be used to provide these services to non-WtW employees. Enhanced services, such as support groups, provided through the EAP exclusively to WtW participants can be funded by WtW.

Would I have to tell my employer that I was treated for substance abuse to take advantage of the EAP?

EAP services are generally available to all employees regardless of treatment history and services are provided confidentially. Sharing personal details with a company-provided EAP is not the same as sharing this information with your employer. In some instances, workers with a history of substance abuse treatment may find it in their best interest to self-disclose to qualify for certain accommodations such as a schedule that will allow attendance at self-help recovery meetings and aftercare treatment.

Do all DFWP programs help create a supportive work environment?

No. DFWP programs that do not provide opportunities for employees to receive treatment and those that do not include an EAP may not create a supportive work environment. A DFWP program that relies entirely on drug testing with a "deter, detect and terminate" philosophy is not likely to create an environment with much support for recovery.

How can employers be encouraged to start DFWP programs?

There are numerous materials, hotlines and Web sites available for educating employers of the value of DFWPs. The Department of Labor's Working Partners for an Alcohol-and Drug-Free Workplace Web site (www.dol.gov/dol/workingpartners.htm) provides an excellent starting point for acquiring this information.

