

Safety Zone: Substance Abuse in the Workplace

Your workers use equipment, handle materials and perhaps drive vehicles whether they work in your office, warehouse, factory or job site.

Regardless of the hazards of their tasks, they need to be mentally alert for the sake of their safety and health, the safety and health of coworkers, their productivity and your profitability. Workers under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs and even legal drugs (for example, sinus pills that cause drowsiness) are not fully alert. They endanger themselves, their coworkers, your customers and other nearby persons. The Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) has estimated that abuse of alcohol and other drugs costs U.S. businesses over \$100 billion yearly due to lost productivity, accidents, worker turnover and other problems. The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimated that 10-23% of American workers use dangerous drugs on the job. They report these employees are:

- Up to four times more likely to be in a work accident
- Five times more likely to file a workers' compensation claim
- Two and a half times more likely to be absent for more than eight days

This sheet addresses some basics of a substance abuse policy. It is not all-encompassing. The National Safety Council, resources from SAMSHA or individual state organizations that assist with drug-free workplace guidance and implementation can help prevent issues, and identify and care for problem workers. Your employment law attorney or human resources professional can refer you to resources consistent with your state's requirements or assist directly in helping you draft and implement a policy that protects you as you protect your workers.

Substance abuse policy basics include:

Clear, comprehensive written policy

Many states have specific policy requirements that must be met. Some states offer model policies that can be used directly or as a starting point. In all cases, make sure your policies are consistent with your state's Workers' Compensation Act as well as applicable employment law. It is strongly recommended that employers obtain proper professional, legal and/or human resources expertise in formulating and implementing your program.

- Consider involving employees in drafting the policy, as they may have valuable ideas to contribute
- State why you have implemented your policy (showing you care for them can increase their loyalty to you and make them more likely to adhere to the policy)

Contact Info:

PHONE: 888.486.7466

WEB: www.amtrustfinancial.com

EMAIL: AskLC@amtrustgroup.com

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- State specifically the behaviors that are banned (for example, using or selling illegal drugs on the job; operating machines or vehicles while under the influence of any illegal drug, alcohol, or legal drug causing drowsiness)
- State specifically the consequences for workers who violate the policy (ex. day off without pay; mandatory attendance at rehabilitation class; job transfer; termination)

Train supervisors/foremen

- Give them details of your policy
- Train them in identifying signs of substance abuse
- Train them how to enforce your policy

Train employees

- Ensure workers know that substance abuse will not be tolerated, and encourage them to spread the word that substance abuse will not be tolerated
- Give a copy of your policy to all existing personnel and new hires
- Train them in the signs, symptoms and perils of drug abuse

Conduct substance abuse testing

- Deter substance abuse and identify workers with potential problems through regular testing
- Consult with your attorney about applicable laws
- Use only trained personnel to interact with the employee in all matters relating to the administration of the program, referral for specimen collection, chain of custody, matters of confidentiality, authorized laboratories and all other legal requirements of your state

Implement an employee assistance program

- Use trained persons for this (many firms offer this service on a contractual basis)
- Many employees feeling stress (ex. financial, marital) benefit from this counseling and avoid resorting to alcohol or drugs

Whatever you specify in your policy, be sure to set an example for your workers by obeying it to the letter. Workers are more likely to follow your policy if they see you obeying it. Consistently enforce your policy, too. Workers are more likely to observe it if they learn that violations will not be tolerated. Review your policy periodically and revise as your needs require.

For additional information and resources on this topic and other safety and risk management subjects, be sure to visit the [Loss Control](#) section on our website.