



Supervisor Newsletter

Effective Substance Abuse Policies

A substance abuse policy that meets all requirements of state law is the first requirement for certification as a drug free workplace. But what constitutes a “good” substance abuse policy?

At a minimum, a substance abuse policy should include a definition of substance abuse, expectations for employee behavior, and consequences for violating the policy. The policy should also describe the company's treatment and rehabilitation resources that are available for employees who abuse drugs or alcohol.

A good policy will be clear and structured in such a way that there are no “loopholes” that might encourage complacency or a lack of belief in its effectiveness.

Most substance abuse policies focus primarily on safety and include information on drug testing, but while drug testing is an important part of a comprehensive drug free workplace program, it is not enough on its own to improve the health of a workforce. Much of the negative impact of alcohol and other drugs in the workplace is not just in safety, but in productivity and absenteeism rates.

Therefore, in addition to meeting all federal, state, and local laws governing drug testing, a good substance abuse policy (and accompanying procedures) will also reduce the damaging effects of drug and alcohol use, fatigue, stress, and mental health issues by creating a healthy workplace culture where:

- wellbeing is valued and supported,
- workers receive substance abuse prevention information/education and support,
- supervisors and team leaders are trained to identify workers at risk,
- clear referral options such as an identified employee assistance program (EAP) provider and/or a list of local treatment and counseling centers are available,
- there are return-to-work options for workers who have been impaired, and,
- there are clear expectations about what is and what is not acceptable to ensure fitness for work.

Workplaces with effective drug and alcohol policies and procedures have happier, healthier, and more productive staff along with increased productivity and reduced absenteeism.

Enforcing the Substance Abuse Policy

No matter how good a substance abuse policy may be, it is useless if not distributed and enforced. Consistent application and enforcement of the policy is the responsibility of supervisors, managers, and the human resources department.

It is also important to make sure everyone has a copy of and is enforcing the same (updated) policy. Having multiple variations of the same policy floating around can lead to all sorts of issues.

The substance abuse policy should be included in the employee handbook and updated when necessary. Policy reminders should be distributed to employees and supervisors (such as in paychecks) when there are policy changes and/or legal updates.

Supervisors and/or HR should have a signed acknowledgment form from all employees indicating receipt and understanding of the policy and its updates, and a copy of the policy should be available in the employer's HR office or other suitable location.

Supervisors must be trained on the substance abuse policy and its updates as this is a requirement of drug

free certification, and necessary to avoid potential liability for allegations of unfair employment practices.

The HR department must have guidelines in place for assisting supervisors and managers in enforcing the substance abuse policy. Disciplinary reviews or corrective actions that may be taken have to be clearly spelled out in the policy and/or the employee handbook.

The substance abuse policy must also be enforced fairly and consistently. Failure to do so could put the company in a position of legal liability. Giving preferential treatment to certain employees, even if unintentional, is discriminatory. Firing one employee for actions another received a "slap on the wrist" for could qualify as unlawful termination. This is why it is important to maintain detailed records of policy enforcement. Always document the action taken and the disciplinary measure(s) that accompanied a violation of the policy.

Conclusion

A legally sound, updated substance abuse policy is required for drug free certification and is essential for fostering a safe working environment, but having supervisors who are trained on effectively enforcing the policy is equally important.



DrugFree@WorkPlace

Increase in Workplace Drug Use

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. SAMHSA administers the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH).

Recently, SAMHSA reported that according to the NSDUH, 61% of working adults have a substance use disorder (SUD). This is a shocking statistic and for some people, somewhat difficult to believe.

To understand how this could be correct, we must know how federal agencies define substance use and how they collect their data.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, SAMHSA collected information for the National Survey on Drug Use and Health by conducting nationwide in-person surveys. After the pandemic, the agency changed to a combination of in-person and Internet interviews for its survey. This changed the demographics of people answering the survey questions and impacted the results.

Additionally, it is important to understand SAMHSA's definition of "substance use." The definition is broad and includes alcohol, tobacco, vaping, marijuana, and other illicit drug use as well as the use and misuse of prescription drugs. These two factors help explain the reported increase in workplace substance use.

Another contributing factor is the increase in opioid use at work. Often, workplace slip, trip, and fall injuries are treated with narcotic painkillers, and some people who use prescription opioids go on to abuse them and develop a substance use disorder. Add to this the increase in positive workplace drug tests for marijuana (Quest Diagnostics Laboratories announced that post-accident drug tests for marijuana reached its highest level in 25 years), and we begin to see that the NSDUH data could be a true representation of substance use by employees.

In line with the NSDUH data, pre-employment and post-accident drug testing for all drugs have shown an increase in substance use over the past few years. Quest Diagnostics' testing has shown widespread increases in "test positivity" for amphetamines, cocaine, and marijuana across all industry sectors.

Identifying Substance Abuse

With the increase in workplace substance use, it is more important than ever for employees and supervisors to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms of substance use disorders among coworkers.

Substance abuse and addiction can happen to anyone, and substance use disorder is a progressive disease. Unless something occurs to break the cycle of addiction, the problem will worsen.

Anyone can become addicted, and anyone can overdose. But no one develops a drug or alcohol problem without warning signs. There will almost always be significant changes in the physical appearance, attitude, and/or behavior of the individual.

Some basic short- and long-term physical warning signs of being under the influence include small pupils, a decreased respiratory rate, non-responsiveness, drowsiness, loss or increase in appetite, weight loss or weight gain, intense flu-like symptoms, wearing long-sleeves, and hiding arms.

Behavioral changes in attitude and/or personality may include a tendency to avoid contact with coworkers, family, and/or friends; a change in friends, hobbies, activities, and/or

sports; drops in performance at work, isolation and secretive behavior as well as moodiness, irritability, nervousness, and giddiness.

Advanced signs of addiction include missing medication; burned or missing spoons and/or bottle caps, syringes; small bags with powder residue; and missing shoelaces and/or belts.

There may also be risk-taking when using, such as driving under the influence; neglecting responsibilities and experiencing legal trouble such as arrests for disorderly conduct or public drunkenness.

Don't Ignore the Problem

When someone is struggling with an addiction, it can severely impact their personal and professional life and may put the people they work with in danger. Ignoring the problem or avoiding taking action to avoid conflict will only make matters worse.

Directly addressing a coworker's substance abuse can provide the impetus for them to get help and recover. There are a wide range of evidence-based treatments for drug and alcohol addiction and people do get well, but being put into a position to take the first step to recovery by seeking treatment is the most important action.