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Feature Section**

Focus: Health Care

Employers need to identify, address substance abuse

By Adrienne Marcus

Substance abuse is rampant in the United States, as evidenced by the myriad news stories about DWI, DUI and other substance-related arrests many of which are related to teens and young adults.

However, substance abuse is a problem for adults, as well. In Westchester, adults between the ages of 35 and 54 account for nearly 50 percent of those who have been admitted to substance-abuse services. This age group accounts for 63.42 percent or 287,031 - of the nation's total work force, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

USE OF ILLICIT SUBSTANCES, ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO IN NEW YORK, 2004-2005, BY AGE GROUP								
SUBSTANCE	ALL		12 - 17		18 - 26		26+	
	PER- CENT	STATE RANK	PER- CENT	STATE RANK	PER- CENT	STATE RANK	PER- CENT	STATE RANK
Marijuana	12	12	15	18	32	13	8	9
Cocaine	2	12	2	37	7	18	2	8
Pain killers	4	39	6	43	11	35	3	37
All illicit	9	10	11	15	24	10	7	9
Alcohol*	7	42	5	36	17	33	5	45
Tobacco	28	41	13	42	43	41	27	38
Need treatment	9	27	5	24	9	15	1	27
Mental distress	11	34	-	-	19	32	10	31

*Dependence or abuse

Source: U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Employers need to be aware of how to identify substance abuse and chemical dependency and how to address it not only for the health and safety of those afflicted, but for their colleagues as well.

The problem

"It's under control."

"I don't have a problem."

"It's not affecting my performance at work."

Chemical dependency is a disease with both genetic and environmental antecedents. Whether it is a physical or psychological dependence, it will get progressively worse.

Work force and substance-abuse experts alike agree it is imperative to understand the impact of chemical dependency on job performance and to determine a way to help those affected. Chemically dependent workers have higher turnover rates and decreased productivity, and accrue increased medical costs to their employers. In fact, alcoholism alone causes 500 million lost work days each year, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

A survey conducted by The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found that “drug-using employees are 2.2 times more likely to request early dismissal or time off, 2.5 times more likely to have absences of eight days or more, three times more likely to be late for work, 3.6 times more likely to be involved in a workplace accident, and five times more likely to file a workers’ compensation claim.”

The signs

Chemically-dependent individuals are frequently forgetful, slow in response rates, regularly miss deadlines, exhibit poor listening skills and show inconsistency in overall job performance. They are also hostile and argumentative, complain frequently and have a generally negative attitude. Violent behavior and carelessness are not uncommon traits, nor are poor personal appearance, inappropriate work attire and poor hygiene. Substance abusers also have short attention spans and ignore their responsibilities.

The first step to remedy a workplace substance-abuse problem and to ensure that other employees are able to work in a safe work environment is to identify the problem.

Getting, providing help

It is in an employer’s best interest to help employees in need and to provide a supportive environment for them. First and foremost, implementing the proper programs can save employers thousands even hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in insurance claims, workers’ compensation claims, lost productivity and lawsuits.

If there is not one already in place, human resources managers can implement a drug-free policy. This written policy must apply to everyone, including company administrators and human resource managers, and it should address specific rules by which all employees must abide. It should be shared and openly discussed to ensure that the rules are clearly understood. A written policy also serves as backup for any future legal action that might occur.

Managers must agree to implement and enforce the policy, since they ultimately handle employee complaints and make referrals to employee assistance programs. Staffs at such programs are knowledgeable about local resources, programs and support systems and can help the employee identify the proper services for their specific needs.

The rehabilitation process can be successful with a strong support system. It is more beneficial to employers to offer assistance and support to those employees afflicted with substance-abuse problems. Rather than terminate their employment at the detriment of company image and employee morale, employers must empower those who are not in control of their actions and help them help themselves.

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