

# Utilizing an Employee Assistance Program

## to Combat Drug Abuse in the Workplace

By RANDY KRATZ

There's an opioid addiction epidemic in our society, and it affects people from all walks of life, including your employees. Abuse of opioid painkillers like Vicodin and OxyContin—often legally obtained by a physician—has reached crisis levels and opened the gateway to use of other drugs. Companies need to stay current with drug testing policies and expand existing testing panels to include commonly prescribed medications (opioids), as well as illicit drugs and alcohol. By testing for prescription drug abuse, an employer is, in essence, offering employees access to help and treatment. But while establishing a drug testing policy is important, it's often a limited first step. After all, a drug test only identifies use of a drug, not how to



address the addiction or prevent one from developing. That's where an employee assistance program (EAP) can help.

EAPs became popular in the early 20th century as a way to combat workforce substance abuse, particularly industrial alcoholism. An EAP often serves as an extension of a company human resource team and provides a confidential outlet for employees who need assistance with a variety of life concerns, one of which is substance abuse. Having such a program available tells your employees that the company is not only invested in rooting out drug use, but is also invested in improving employees' health and well-being.

The first step you as an employer can take is to work with an independent drug



under  
THE INFLUENCE?

## Oral Fluid Testing Provides the Answer

The legalization of marijuana is creating challenges for businesses and the ability to maintain the integrity of their "drug free" work programs. Workplaces need an alternative that can identify current or more recent use as an indicator of being "under the influence". As the market leader in oral fluid testing, Intercept leads the way in recent drug detection.

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testing vendor to establish a drug testing program that adheres to current laws and the latest testing methods. Determine the timing and frequency of testing—pre-employment, random, reasonable suspicion, post-accident or return to duty—and ensure you have the ability to offer drug testing for second- and third-shift workers as well as first, if needed.

By combining a firm drug policy with constant reminders that the company will conduct periodic drug testing, you can discourage drug users from applying to or working at your company. It also deters current employees from using drugs, giving them an easy out by saying, "No thanks, they drug test at work."

Start the conversation by educating your workforce on the expectations of your drug testing program and what resources are accessible via the company EAP.

### Reducing Accidents, Controlling Costs

Companies also find a drug-free program can save money by reducing health care costs, preventing accidents and increasing efficiency and output. Employ-

ees under the influence are more likely to be involved in an on-the-job accident because of impaired judgement, response time and reflexes. Those poor decisions may result in workers' compensation claims to the company.

Even if an employee's behavior or poor company process is not at fault, workplace injuries can become a starting point for addiction. Pain medication may be necessary immediately after the injury, but over-prescribing and misuse escalate to larger problems—for the employee and the company. Appellate courts in four states have held that employers and insurers are financially accountable for overdose deaths tied to injured workers. A combination of medical and EAP resources can help avoid similar outcomes through alternative treatments and support for both physical and mental health.

In the case of an employee who fails a drug test, an EAP will provide an initial drug and alcohol assessment and, when necessary, refer the employee to a treatment agency. The EAP also will assist you, the employer, with a return to work agreement and by monitoring the

employee's progress in treatment. To avoid risk of relapse, the EAP can continue to provide support once treatment has been completed.

The employee's covered family members may also utilize the EAP to help manage addiction issues or other personal problems, providing additional peace of mind for your employee. Recognizing an employee has a drug problem is important, and drug testing in your workplace is the first step to protecting employees while maintaining a safe, dedicated workforce. When combined with the benefits of an EAP, you can double your investment and help improve the quality of life for your employees and their family members. **FSM**

**Randy Kratz** is an account manager at FEI Behavioral Health and is a licensed clinical social worker and licensed professional counselor in the state of Wisconsin. FEI Behavioral Health offers flexible solutions for the full spectrum of workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. Visit [www.feinet.com](http://www.feinet.com) for additional information.

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