

# More Employers Adopt Drug-Testing

Substance abuse in the workplace costs companies \$7,000 per worker per year.

By Joe Giesy

To promote safety in the workplace, many Mahoning Valley employers screen both applicants and their employees for drug use. They have two goals – to protect their employees and save money – by reducing the incidence of drug & alcohol related accidents.

“A drug-testing program is one of the first and easiest things to [implement if the employer wants] a safe workplace with fewer accidents,” the owner of On Demand Drug Testing, Stefanie Ivany says.

Statistics from the state Bureau of Workers’ Compensation show that 16% of employed Ohioans have a substance abuse problem and that an abuser is three to four times more likely to have an accident on the job.

On Demand Drug Testing is based in Austintown. A review of its records shows an 8% positive rate on the tests it administered.

The best reason for a company to adopt drug testing is to protect itself and its employees, Ivany says.

“It protects their image and what people think about them,” she elaborates.

Most of her clients choose to continue to test for drugs, she says, despite the reduced discount the BWC awards companies for participating in its Drug-Free Workplace program. Under that program, a lengthy record of no drug-related accidents allows companies to opt out of random testing of its employees for drug abuse.

“There used to be financially a reason to drug test because they could get a discount off their workers’ compensation insurance,” Ivany says. Today the discount incentive is far less.

Where the BWC, based on the safety program an employer participated in, once awarded

companies discounts of between 15% and 20% on their premiums, today that discount has been reduced by four-fifths – even though substance users are still five times more likely to file a claim.

Doug Wentz, community services director for the Neil Kennedy Recovery Clinic in Youngstown, estimates that 44,000 workers in the Mahoning Valley have a substance abuse problem.

The cost per substance user ranges from \$7,000 to \$25,000 annually, which adds up to a total bill Valley employers pay of \$308 million to \$1.1 billion.

On Demand performs monthly random drug screenings for its clients and Ivany says she tries to keep the dates of the tests unpredictable. The workers chosen are determined by a list of employee records On Demand keeps in-house. “All of our companies are progressive enough to see that it’s better if you do [drug screening],” she says.

When on Demand visits a company to conduct random testing, Ivany says, usually at least one employee tests positive. When that occurs, it typically means the employee consumed the substance within the past 24 hours.

“There have been people have been positive for four or five different drugs,” Ivany says. “They had absolutely no business being around in any workplace.”

The likelihood of a substance abuser causing an accident on the job becomes more problematic because in 40% of such accidents, a co-worker is also injured. Between a third and a half of all workers’ compensation claims are the result of ingesting drugs or alcohol, experts say.

The sooner a drug test is administered, the greater the likelihood of an abuser being caught, Ivany says, because all traces of some drugs leave the body within three days.

Ivany recommends lab tests over instant tests because the former are more accurate and results are typically back within a day or two.

If a company does not have a drug program in place, Ivany says, many of their other safety

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programs are undermined if even one employee is on drugs.

BWC data say nearly half of all serious workplace accidents and 40% of workplace fatalities are related to drug or alcohol use.

Cara Londino, an attorney and human resources director at East Coast Risk Management, says that a comprehensive safety plan includes pre-employment testing to ensure new hires are drug-free before their first day on the job, a “fit-for-duty provision” in the company policy manuals that allows for testing of drugs or alcohol when an employer has “reasonable suspicion” and testing after a workplace accident or injury.

“By minimizing the risk of impaired employees in the workplace, every employer realizes a positive impact to its bottom line in lower insurance premiums and lessening the frequency and severity of Workers’ Compensation claims,” Londino says.

East Coast Risk Management has more than 150 clients in eight states. Londino says its staff counsels all clients on how to affect drug and alcohol screening programs.

“A valuable risk management tool is the consistent enforcement of a comprehensive drug and alcohol testing policy,” she says.

Meridian Community Care, a nonprofit organization in Youngstown that offers addiction recovery and prevention services, provides its clients vision, hearing and physical exams in addition to drug and alcohol screenings.

Meridian’s workforce health director, Amy Zellers, says companies want several types of safety measures in their workplaces.

Some companies have a zero-tolerance policy, she says. That means the employee who fails the test is fired as soon as the results come back. Others favor rehabilitation and keeping the worker on staff because of the investment a company has in an employee.

“It’s really a good thing in the long run,” Zellers says. Rehabilitated employees often become better performers because they are given a second chance.

Many employees who receive treatment are grateful because they don’t realize they have a problem or its severity until it’s too late.

Often, Zellers continues, an employee starts his abuse by taking prescription drugs and becoming hooked. Not until he’s in an accident does he recognize his dependency and how the medication affected his performance.

Meridian’s Worklife employee assistance program helps employers identify substance abusers and enroll them in treatment.

Another is Gateway Rehab’s Back on Track program that provides preventative and rehabilitation services to employers concerned with substance abuse in the workplace. Gateway Rehabilitation Center is based in Pittsburgh; Youngstown’s Neil Kennedy Clinic is an affiliate.

David Blenk, Gateway’s executive vice president of strategic planning and business development there, says the program was developed in response to a rising drug and alcohol problem in the workplace. The program provides services to more than 70 employers in northeastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Gateway Rehab and its affiliates see more than 7,000 people a year.

The program provides prevention services such as training and education and tailors them to what a company needs. Blenk has seen prescription drug abuse increase and confirms that prescribed medications sometimes become a gateway to illicit drugs.

It’s usually when the ill-effects of addiction outweigh the pleasures a drug provides that abusers seek help, Blenk Says.

Once the employee seeks intervention, the employer can ask the Back on Track program for help.

“It really is a commitment to the employee,” Blenk says.