



Building a Recovery-Friendly Workplace

Recovery-friendly workplaces support their communities by recognizing recovery from substance use disorder (SUD) as a strength, and by being willing to work intentionally with people in recovery. These workplaces encourage a healthy and safe environment where employers, employees and communities can collaborate to create positive change and eliminate barriers for those affected by addiction.¹

RECOVERY

Recovery begins when a person regains control over their opioid use disorder (OUD) or SUD and begins to live a healthy, productive life. It is important to remember that:

- Recovery is a personal journey, just as unique as individual SUDs. One person's recovery may differ dramatically from another's recovery.
- Relapse is often a natural part of recovery. Recovering from an OUD or SUD may include making significant lifestyle changes that can be difficult to maintain. People with SUDs may relapse one or more times before recovery becomes long term.

One component of a successful recovery is gainful employment. Being employed offers the opportunity to make progress toward realization of goals, improved family and social relationships, rebuilt financial stability, restoration of self-confidence, and a contribution to society among many other benefits.

THE ROLE EMPLOYERS CAN PLAY

Employers play an important role in helping employees in recovery by embracing people with SUDs. Doing so prevents feelings of stigma and isolation, and greatly improves employees' chances of recovery. A supportive workplace environment can also help prevent relapse.

Employees who are in recovery have equal or lower health care costs, absenteeism and job turnover compared to employees who never report an SUD.² Employers who help employees complete treatment are likely to see a high return on investment when working with employees throughout treatment to achieve recovery. Supporting employees in recovery creates clear reasons and culture for job satisfaction and loyalty in the workforce.

People in recovery often have a high degree of self-awareness, resilience, compassion, dedication and understanding. These skills and behaviors should be valued by employers due to the positive impacts the employee can have on team, company and culture.

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HOW TO BUILD A RECOVERY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACE

All components described in the Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit support a recovery-friendly workplace. Having buy-in from leadership and employees alike, supportive policies and programs such as EAPs, return-to-work plans, support for employees who need treatment or leave, health care benefits that treat SUDs thoroughly and with the same resolve as physical illnesses, and training supervisors to recognize warning signs are all components that create a workplace culture of support and wellness.

- Openly talk about the opioid crisis and SUDs – remember to emphasize that recovery is possible and likely – always provide a message of hope
- Pay attention to your language – using stigmatizing language decreases the likelihood that an employee will seek help when needed
- Be supportive of others – providing support can help change someone’s life
- Know the facts – understanding SUDs reduces stigma and increases acceptance of SUDs as a medical condition from which one can recover
- Celebrate recovery as a strength
- When hiring, if the interviewee reveals a history of SUD and/or that they are in recovery, recognize that no differently than disclosure of other medical conditions
- Have wellness programs that promote and support employee health, work/life balance and wellbeing – stressful conditions can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, including substance use or relapse
- Despite best efforts, gossip can ensue when an employee has to leave employment for a substances use related reason; prevent malicious gossip and ensure an exit with dignity if necessary
- Do not provide alcohol at work events, or provide a variety of non-alcoholic options
- Encourage healthy after-hour activities in addition to or instead of happy hour

Connect with the community

- Participate in recovery-focused community events
- Establish a relationship with a local recovery community organization and initiatives as a resource for employees (for example, recovery coaching or other support groups)

Peer Recovery Support Programs

Peer recovery support is characterized by the provision of non-clinical peer support, which can include activities that engage, educate and support the individual as they make the necessary changes to recover from substance use disorder. Peer providers offer valuable guidance by sharing their own experiences recovering from SUD by helping to build skills, assist with and address specific needs that someone with SUD is faced with. They work to improve social connectedness and help identify new positive social environments, including finding and maintaining employment. Peer recovery support programs keep the concept of “keeping recovery first” by meeting individuals where they are in the recovery process as they help the individual with SUD along their journey.³

Employers can support their local Peer Recovery Support Programs, and help raise awareness of these options by cohosting brown bag lunches or similar events with employees in attendance.

Legal Implications

Every component of the drug free workplace program must:

- Be developed in partnership with the organization's legal advisers
- Safeguard employee confidentiality
- Comply with federal, state and local regulations, including but not limited to OSHA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, Mental Health Parity Act and HIPAA
- Comply with union and industry regulations

The Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit has been developed to raise awareness with businesses about how to respond to the risks associated with the misuse of opioids and other drugs. The content is meant for educational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice or replacing the work needed to develop a responsible drug-free workplace program. As such, it should not be used as a substitute for consultation with a legal professional, or other competent advisor.

Medical advice and information in this document were approved by NSC physicians who advise the Council on our substance use harm initiatives. These doctors also are members of the [NSC Physician Speakers Bureau](#).

¹ Recovery Friendly Workplace New Hampshire. (n.d.). Retrieved August 1, 2019, from <https://www.recoveryfriendlyworkplace.com/initiative>

² Goplerud, E., Hodge, S., & Benham, T. (2017, November). A Substance Use Cost Calculator for US Employers With an Emphasis on Prescription Pain Medication Misuse. Retrieved August 1, 2019, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5671784/>

³ What is the Evidence for Peer Recovery Support Services? (n.d.). Retrieved August 01, 2019, from <https://www.recoveryanswers.org/research-post/what-is-the-evidence-for-peer-recovery-support-services/>