



DrugFree@WorkPlace

## Opioid Deaths in the Workplace Increase

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported recently that drug overdose deaths in American workplaces increased by more than 30% in 2016. This rise in the number of workplace deaths is a result of the opioid epidemic's ongoing impact on U.S. businesses.

The opioid addiction crisis has also caused the life expectancy of American workers to drop for the second year in a row. This is the first time in more than 50 years that the average life expectancy in the U.S. has declined. Opioid use and opioid-related deaths in America continue to increase at an alarming rate.

Many researchers and treatment professionals have said that the opioid epidemic began and has worsened as a result of the over-prescription of opioid-based painkillers. When doctors stop prescribing these addictive pain medications, patients often turn to heroin and other illegal substances to feed their addiction.

### A Continuing Public Health Crisis

There is no doubt that the opioid epidemic has become America's most serious public health crisis. At a time in U.S. history when death rates for the leading causes of death—such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes—are dropping, it is shocking that our society would allow the opioid epidemic to continue taking so many lives.

More than 100 Americans are dying from opioid overdoses every day in our country. More people are dying

from drug overdoses daily than are killed in automobile accidents or by guns.

Narcotic painkiller use has become widespread in the U.S., and millions of Americans are addicted. The addictive potential of opioid-based pills is extremely high, and illegal opioids are cheap and easy to obtain. It is predicted that more than 325,000 Americans will die by overdose over the next five years.

### Workplace Impact

More than 25% of job applicants nationwide fail pre-employment drug tests, and more than 2,000,000 working-age men that are unemployed are addicted to opioid-based painkillers and are no longer even looking for work.

One of the industries hit hardest by the opioid epidemic is the construction industry. Today, there are more unfilled jobs in the construction sector than there were in 2007, right before the economic crash. The number of open construction jobs in August of 2017 reached almost 250,000. This is an almost 35% increase over the past year.

The manufacturing, food service, entertainment, hospitality, and transportation industries have also been hit hard. Several manufacturing companies in Georgia are experiencing as many as 40% of applicants failing a pre-employment drug test, and federal drug test positives among transportation workers in the U.S. have soared to 77%.

The opioid epidemic is costing American businesses in many more ways.

Companies that are already short of skilled workers are unable to fill vacant positions, and are spending more and more to treat the addicts who are on their payrolls. Smaller companies in rural areas where opioid addiction is widespread have suffered the most as a result of the epidemic, but opioid abuse has also been steadily rising in major cities and has begun to impact Fortune 500 companies.

### **Dealing With the Opioid Epidemic**

What can be done to reduce the number of opioid-related deaths in America?

Doctors have begun writing fewer prescriptions for narcotic painkillers, and are now providing patients with information on the addictive properties of the drugs. But more must be done to treat those who are already addicted.

The U.S. government has put pressure on drug manufacturers to stop producing opioid painkillers, and has been successful in getting one major pharmaceutical company to discontinue its opioid-based product, but other companies must now do the same.

State and federal prosecutors are cracking down on prescription drug fraud cases, and the government has put new rules and guidelines in place on opioid prescribing, but more doctors and pharmacists must be educated on the new restrictions.

Many states have passed laws making access to naloxone (the "anti-overdose" drug) easier, but more first

responders and even members of the general public need to be trained on its use.

### **What Companies Can Do to Help**

Employers can contribute to ending the opioid epidemic by implementing and maintaining a drug free workplace program that includes drug testing, and by training supervisors to recognize the signs of addiction. Employees should receive ongoing, annual drug education including information on the dangers of using opioid-based painkillers. Workers who are addicted need to be referred to counseling and treatment programs, and injured workers should be limited on the number of pills or refills that company health plans will cover. The company should promote alternative pain treatments like physical therapy, guided imagery, biofeedback, and relaxation therapy.

It is also important for companies to promote an environment where employees feel safe in reporting opioid-related problems. Addiction should be treated as a health issue, not a moral failing. Workers should be encouraged to talk to supervisors if they have a problem or suspect that another employee may be struggling with prescription painkiller use.

### **Conclusion**

The growing opioid epidemic in America is creating unique challenges in our society and in the workplace. The U.S. government, employers, and employees must work together to find solutions that will save lives and bring an end to the epidemic.