

Construction

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People encounter and use structures built from the construction industry on an everyday basis whether they realize it or not. It happens every time a person enters a building, enjoys a game at a stadium, or drives across a bridge. America's builders have long enjoyed a rich history of designing and erecting landmarks recognizable all over the world. But there are some who are putting themselves, their colleagues, and the general public in danger — they are plaguing the construction industry with their substance abuse. Those who abuse drugs and alcohol are not only threatening their lives and safety but increasing worker's compensation insurance premiums and reducing worker productivity.

According to the Federal government, the construction industry has some of the highest rates of alcohol and drug abuse. In a survey, done by SAMHSA's National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 13.2 percent of males aged 18 or older who reported construction as their occupation, admitted using an illicit drug, while 57.5 percent admitted binge or heavy alcohol use.

Safety in the construction industry is vital; therefore more and more construction firms are addressing workplace substance abuse with drug free workplace programs. This may mean more drug testing, which has become a controversial topic.

Some employees may view random drug testing as an invasion of their privacy, while others view it as a safety mechanism for employees, employers, and customers. Problems can arise when companies enforce a more stringent drug free workplace, as was the case for an electric contracting company in the Philadelphia area. When an employee returned from lunch reeking of marijuana smoke, management felt it was time for a change in their policy. The 60-year-old company's policy already included pre-employment and post accident drug testing, so management did not feel there would be a problem adding random drug testing. Some workers became angry; some even admitted smoking marijuana during the weekend and felt the company had no right to control their free time.

"Small companies are becoming havens for substance abusers because they know they can go there and there's rarely testing," explains Judy Swartley, owner of Quantum Inc, a Philadelphia-area safety/management consulting firm. "I can't emphasize enough the benefit of random testing if a company wants to get rid of substance abuse."

In the last two years, there has been an increase of small businesses implementing drug testing programs, following the lead of most Fortune 500 companies. "I am seeing more and more customers require drug-free programs especially with Fortune 500 companies," Swartley said.

Even iron workers and electrical international unions are each finalizing new national programs to create drug and alcohol free work places.

Contractors will pay about \$30-\$45 per person to test any worker who volunteers for the program. The results are kept in a database accessible to contractors each time they request workers from the union hiring hall. Testing a worker once is more cost efficient than testing each time he or she works for a different contractor. Members of Ironworkers-Management Progressive Action Cooperative Trust or IMPACT who participate in the drug test program have better chances of gaining more work because owners know they are drug-free. Electrical worker's union and the National Electrical Contractors Association agreed in early September to require that a substance abuse testing policy be included in every national and local collective bargaining agreement. "A drug free workplace improves safety, productivity, and enhance our opportunity for employment," said Edwin D. Hill, president of the electrical workers union.

For more information about how a drug-free workplace program can help you, continue to browse this site or contact us at humancapital@utsa.edu.