

Q & A

DOL assists small businesses in addressing DFW needs

Small businesses instituting drug-free workplace programs might not know where to start. Background and reference material available from the

Department of Labor may help. In a conversation with *Workplace Substance Abuse Advisor*, **Elena Carr**, drug policy coordinator and director of the Working Partners Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace program in the DOL discussed the program's Web site, the hallmarks of successful DFW programs, and some common DFW program mistakes that companies should try to avoid.

Q: What does the Working Partners program entail and how can it benefit small businesses?

A: The initiative raises awareness about the impact drugs and alcohol have on the workplace and encourages and empowers employers, unions and others to establish drug-free workplace programs that protect worker safety and health. Although Working Partners resources are applicable to businesses of any size, we designed them with the small businesses in mind. This is because small businesses, which collectively employ the majority of the nation's workers, often perceive instituting a drug-free workplace program as a daunting task. Our tools and information make it easy for small businesses to put effective drug-free workplace programs in place and benefit from being drug free. It is important to note that Working Partners is not an effort by the DOL to regulate workplace substance abuse. Rather, it is an outreach and education initiative that helps companies understand the value of drug-free workplace programs and equips them to develop effective programs.

Q: How can employers benefit from the information on the Working Partners Web site?

A: A main feature of the site is the Drug-Free Workplace Advisor Program Builder, which assists employers, unions and others to develop customized drug-free workplace policies and programs. This tool has separate sections for each of the five components of a drug-free workplace program: a written policy, supervisor training, employee education, employee assistance and drug testing. The policy section outlines the different elements of a comprehensive drug-free workplace policy and prompts users to select answers to simple, preset questions to determine the most appropriate style of policy. Based on users' responses, the system then generates a policy statement, which can be further personalized and modified.

Another site feature is the Substance Abuse Information Database — an online repository of hundreds of documents related to workplace alcohol and drug abuse.

It includes items, such as sample policies, surveys, reports, training and educational materials, and legal and regulatory information.

Q: What are some of the hallmarks of a successful drug-free workplace program?

A: The characteristic common to all effective programs is balance. A successful drug-free workplace program must strike a delicate balance between a number of sometimes competing elements. Examples include balancing the interests of employees vs. the interests of employers, the need to know vs. the need for privacy, detection vs. rehabilitation, and respect for individuals vs. the safety of all. Effective drug-free workplace programs send a strong, clear message that drug use is unacceptable and, at the same time, provide assistance and support for workers in need of treatment for alcohol and drug problems, or who are in recovery from alcoholism or drug addiction.

Employee involvement from the start is critical to achieving this balance. Employers and employees should work together to design a balanced, fair program suited to the unique needs and challenges of their workplaces. The key to success is ensuring that employees understand and appreciate that a drug-free workplace program applies not only to them, but also to all the coworkers and managers on whom

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Q: Conversely, what are some of the pitfalls of a drug-free workplace program, and how can those be avoided?

A: One mistake some employers make is equating drug testing with a drug-free workplace program. Drug testing is only one component of a drug-free workplace program, and in some circumstances, a drug-free workplace program may be effective without drug testing. If used, drug testing works best as one part of a comprehensive approach that also includes supervisor training on signs and symptoms of substance abuse, education for employees about the dangers of substance abuse, access to treatment for employees who have alcohol or drug problems, and support for those in recovery.

Also, focusing solely on termination of workers with substance abuse problems rather than offering them opportunities for rehabilitation can be shortsighted on the part of employers. Oftentimes, it is more beneficial for employers to support workers in need of treatment for substance abuse problems by allowing them to return to work when they are able to do so at full capacity.

For more information, visit the Web site www.dol.gov/workingpartners. ■

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We'd like to know what topics you'd like to see covered in upcoming Q&A. Please forward your suggestions to: Larry Graff, editor, SA, via e-mail at lgraff@lrp.com, or by phone at (561) 622-6520, Ext. 8703. ■