



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D. C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Log R-604B

Date: August 9, 1988

In reply refer to: R-88-39

Mr. William Dempsey  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
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In 1987, the National Transportation Safety Board undertook a safety study to review the first full year of implementation of the current Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) alcohol and drug rule. Also, the Safety Board wanted to examine what actions beyond those required by the rule could be undertaken by the railroads and the Federal government to reduce high losses from accidents involving railroad employees in safety-sensitive positions who continue to use alcohol and/or drugs on the job. <sup>1/</sup>

In 1987 and 1988, attention has been focused on accidents/incidents in which the use of alcohol and/or drugs by railroad employees has led to fatalities and serious injuries. The Safety Board's study reviewed the results of its accident investigation activities over the past 16 years (1972-87), all safety recommendations related to those accidents, and the responses of the organizations (public and private) to the Board's recommendations. Additionally, the Safety Board visited 10 railroads and interviewed more than 120 people directly involved in the railroad industry.

All of the railroads examined by the Safety Board had employee assistance programs (EAP). EAP programs originally were created to address employee alcohol dependency. Later, they began to include assistance with other personal problems, such as family and mental discord, all types of dependencies and addictions, and financial matters. However, alcohol problems still account for the majority of cases seen by those railroad EAP programs examined by the Safety Board. The Union Pacific (UP) reports that 54 percent of the cases dealt with by their EAP program from 1981-85 were the result of alcohol problems; alcohol and drugs together accounted for 63 percent of employee cases during that period. The Burlington Northern Railroad Company (BN) reported that in 1987, 41 percent of its approximately 2,600 new cases were alcohol and/or drug problems.

Although every railroad reviewed by the Safety Board had taken steps to inform its employees about the company's EAP program, the degree to which the employees were actually informed about or familiar with the services available, as well as where and how to obtain these services, varied considerably among the railroads. These differences seemed to relate to two frequently mentioned factors: a "reminder" or periodic information on EAP programs and the extent to which EAP

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<sup>1/</sup> For more detailed information, read Safety Study--*Alcohol/Drug Use and Its Impact on Railroad Safety* (NTSB/SS-88/04).

counselors and first-line supervisors talk to employees about alcohol/drug abuse and the EAP. Given the mobility of rail employees and the turnover in certain job categories, periodic communications to employees concerning EAP programs, as well as alcohol and drug abuse issues and the need for compliance with safety rules, are essential. The railroad companies with the best-informed employees issued periodic communications on alcohol/drug abuse and EAP programs. Additionally, these railroad companies covered these topics in semiannual safety meetings, and their EAP counselors visited job sites to explain the EAP programs. For example, the BN issued numerous alcohol and drug informational pamphlets and distributed to every employee the company's EAP newsletter, *The Messenger*.

One measure of the quality of EAP services is the access to and availability of services, indicated by the ratio of counselors to employees. Some experts suggest that one full-time EAP professional for every 2,500 to 3,000 employees is a realistic ratio for industry.<sup>2/</sup> On the UP, an EAP counselor is assigned to a territory with 2,800 to 3,000 employees. The maximum caseload per counselor is 80 to 85 cases per year. On the BN, 3,300 employees are assigned to one counselor who handles between 20 and 26 new cases every month, or about 250 to 300 cases per year. With systems spanning thousands of miles over many States, some EAP counselors are responsible for several thousand employees spread over three or more States. Although there was no evidence of a problem with the current EAP programs examined during this study, the Safety Board is concerned that continuing high caseloads, particularly when counselors are so geographically dispersed, may in the long term make it very difficult to continue to provide accessible, high quality EAP counseling.

A related quality issue is the cost to employees of EAP-referred treatment services. Most company treatment programs are paid for by employees through their health insurance (BN is an exception; the company pays for the treatment program). Insurance benefits for mental health and drug/alcohol treatment, arranged by railroad companies, should complement and support EAP programs. Without this support, competent treatment services would not be accessible to railroad employees who need them.

Despite the extensive costs in establishing and maintaining EAP programs (for example, estimated by BN as \$1.5 million per year), most railroad companies told the Safety Board they believe such programs are highly beneficial. Using conservative statistics from the Association of Labor, Management, Alcoholism, Counselors and Administrators and the National Council on Alcoholism, the UP claims a minimum of a 7 to 1 return benefit for its EAP effort. Likewise, the BN believes that its 93 percent success rate in the first year (93 percent of the employees in the program did not return to the EAP program) is an indication of the benefits of its program.

Therefore, as a result of its study, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Association of American Railroads:

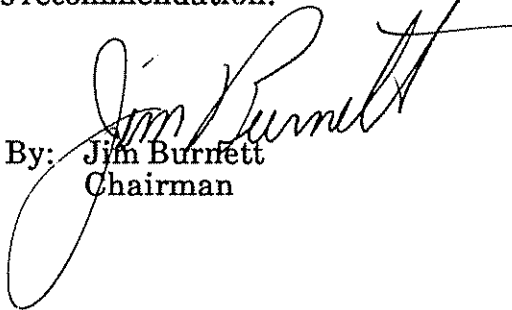
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<sup>2/</sup> James Ohers, "Assessment, Referral, Counseling Elements of Inhouse Programs," *Occupational Health & Safety Magazine*, December 1987.

Encourage your members to ensure that railroad employees are informed of the nature and availability of employee assistance program (EAP) services, particularly the EAP's ability to assist in addressing substance abuse. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-88-39)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations R-88-23 through -33 to the Federal Railroad Administration, R-88-34 through -36 to members of the Association of American Railroads, R-88-37 to members of the Railway Labor Executives' Association, and R-88-38 to the Urban Mass Transportation Administration.

BURNETT, Chairman, KOLSTAD, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER, NALL, and DICKINSON, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

By:   
Jim Burnett  
Chairman