

## What employers can do to nip drug problems in the bud

The Denver Business Journal - May 26, 2006 by [Cathy Proctor and Amy Fletcher](#) Denver Business Journal

Employers can head off drug problems at work by developing a written drug policy, applying it consistently and training supervisors to recognize early signs of drug abuse.

That's the advice of drug counselors, human resource experts and lawyers who have dealt with meth use in the workplace.

Many employers test workers for illegal drugs, especially as a condition of employment. But they often overlook their own policies that allow them to test for "reasonable suspicion" after a person is on the job, and don't train supervisors to recognize when workers may have a problem.

"With meth, reasonable suspicion would be important," said employment lawyer Dave Smith of Mountain States Employers Council (MSEC) in Denver. "It's important to identify that you will do reasonable-suspicion testing but also to train your supervisors on what to look for."

Employers should take an ongoing interest in drug abuse because workers using drugs are more likely to miss work, file worker's compensation claims for on-the-job injuries and perform at a lower level, said David Zwisler, Mountain State's director of labor relations.

Zwisler gets two to three calls a day from employers asking everything from how to handle an employee suspected of drug abuse to how to proceed after a worker fails a test. The council has 2,500 members.

Most questions are about marijuana, but more callers are asking about methamphetamines as the drug has moved deeper into society.

"It's one more drug that employers are curious about," Zwisler said. "The underlying issue is how do I test individuals, if I can, to ensure that people under the influence of substances won't affect my workplace."

Zwisler said he has a sample policy to show employers, and MSEC members who work with STAT America drug-testing company pay about \$28.50 per employee test.

"Some employers have an obligation to test, particularly federally regulated companies," he said. "Others have a right to as long as they've informed their employees."

Either way, privacy is always important, said Denver lawyer Tim Parsons, who works with construction unions. "Only the people who have a real need to know find out what the test results are," he said.

The state chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America acts as a liaison between Colorado's construction unions and building companies. As part of the union contract, all workers are tested before employment as well as randomly throughout the year. They are also subject to any drug-testing program used by a specific company, said Dick O'Brecht, the executive director of AGC in Colorado.

Construction companies realize that testing for drugs creates an artificial labor shortage due to the number of people who test positive for drugs, he said, but the cost of not doing drug tests is also unacceptable.

"Everybody has recognized that if they don't have a company-wide testing program they're going to get the dregs of the workforce that's available, and their insurance rates are going to go sky high

because of higher injury rates," O'Brecht said.

The chapter pays an average of \$3,000 per month for drug tests on union construction workers. Union workers make up about 12 percent of Colorado's construction work force.

O'Brecht said he doesn't know the number of positive drug tests among the union workforce, or how many of those are from meth. Nor do construction contractors talk about meth, specifically, in the industry. "Everybody just acknowledges that drugs are a problem in the industry without ever talking about it -- and therefore you have to have a drug testing program to weed these guys out. It's a question of productivity and safety on the job," O'Brecht said.

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