Industry Groups Team Up to Fight Jobsite Drug and Alcohol Use

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By Pam Hunter

A new industry coalition is hoping to create awareness about alcohol and drug use in the workplace and ultimately reduce injuries and fatalities caused by jobsite substance abuse.

Member organizations of the Construction Coalition for a Drug- and Alcohol-Free Workplace, formally launched last month, contend that substance abuse is still a problem on construction sites. They cite statistics from the New York City-based National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence that show the construction industry has some of the highest rates of workplace drug and alcohol use across all industries.

In general, across all occupations, 24% of employees have admitted to drinking at work, and 35% of employees hospitalized for workplace injuries over the past year were at-risk drinkers, according to the council.

Anecdotally, some construction owners believe that with the slight uptick in skilled labor returning to work as a result of an improving economy, construction managers may need to provide some remedial substance-abuse training for those who have been out of work due to the recession, says Greg Sizemore, executive vice president of the Construction Users Roundtable (CURT), an owner advocacy group.

Supporting the initiative is "the right thing to do," Sizemore says, not only to ensure that workers who come to work go home safe, but because worker injuries due to drug and alcohol use is a "productivity and cost" issue.

Besides CURT, the coalition includes the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), the Construction Industry Roundtable, and Women Construction Owners and Executives.

Although various segments of the industry have long had drug-testing programs in place, the current initiative is the first formal collaborative effort by a cross section of industry organizations, says ABC President and CEO Mike Bellaman. What has stymied previous efforts is the fact that different states have different drug- and alcohol-testing requirements, notes Stephen Sandherr, chief executive officer of AGC. The current initiative gets around that challenge by asking member companies, government entities and others to sign a pledge that they will work to do what they can to make their construction jobs sites drug- and alcohol-free. They can do that by either adopting the best practices outlined on the coalition's website or developing programs of their own that meet state requirements, Bellaman says.

Coalition officials say they hope to reach out to other organizations within the industry, including union groups, as well as federal agencies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. "We have no preferences as to labor posture," notes CURT's Sizemore. "It's about improving safety performance on the job." With the thousands of member firms represented by the coalition's founders, "We think we're off to a good start," Bellaman says.

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