DEALING WITH WORKPLACE DRUG ABUSE

ESTIMATES FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (DOL) INDICATE THAT IN 2007:

- 13.1 million (75.3 percent) of the 17.4 million adults classified with substance dependence or abuse were employed full-time.
- Of the reported 55.3 million adult binge drinkers, 44 million (79.4 percent) were employed.
- Of the reported 16.4 million people heavy use of alcohol, of them 13.1 million (79.6 percent) were employed.

A drug free workplace: A safe, healthy and drug-free workplace is everyone’s responsibility. Below are steps suggested by the DOL that you can take to help a co-worker who may have an alcohol or drug problem. By knowing what to do (and what not to do), employees can play a powerful role in improving workplace safety by encouraging co-workers with alcohol or drug problems to get help. Most of us know someone, perhaps a family member, friend or co-worker, who has been affected by alcohol or drug abuse in some way.

Some of the signs vary by the abuser’s drugs of choice, but what you see that person doing and how you interact is often the same, regardless of the substance being used.

BOTH ON AND OFF THE JOB, SYMPTOMS OF ALCOHOL OR DRUG USE:

- **Physical** - chills, smell, sweating, weight loss, physical deterioration.
- **Emotional** - increased aggression, anxiety, burnout, denial, depression, paranoia.
- **Behavioral** - excessive talking, impaired coordination, irritability, lack of energy, limited attention span.

It is important to note, however, that if an employee displays these symptoms, it does not necessarily mean there is a substance abuse problem.

SIGNS THAT SUBSTANCE ABUSE HAS BECOME A WORKPLACE PROBLEM:

- Creating mishaps, being careless and repeatedly making mistakes.
- Damaging equipment or property.
- Being involved in accidents.
• Displaying careless actions with hazardous materials or equipment.
• Being unreliable or argumentative.
• Showing a lack of detail on performing routine job duties.
• Unwilling to follow directions.
• Giving elaborate, unbelievable excuses for not fulfilling responsibilities.

SIGNS THAT SUBSTANCE ABUSE HAS BECOME A WORKPLACE PROBLEM (CONTINUED):
• Not carrying one’s load.
• Taking unnecessary risks.
• Disregarding safety for self and others.

Don’t allow it to continue: For your own safety, it is imperative that you not tolerate such conduct by a co-worker. This can be difficult as it may seem easier to ignore the problem by providing alibis or doing their work, developing reasons why the co-worker’s continued use of alcohol or drugs is understandable or just avoiding contact altogether. Doing so, however, allows the employee’s behavior to continue and could potentially cause future harm to you, him or her, and your other co-workers.

Individual responsibility: Workplace alcohol and drug abuse must not be taken lightly, especially in environments where workers rely on each other for safety. While supervisors can confront workers whose behavior affects their job performance, co-workers may be able to help before this occurs. It is critically important for employees to understand that it is not their responsibility to diagnose problems. Rather, they should observe behavior and focus on safety. Though notifying a supervisor may be necessary, a co-worker may have significant influence using the right approach.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT A COWORKER HAS A PROBLEM:
• **Show concern**: Say you have noticed a change in behavior and express your concern for their safety and that of other workers.
• **Describe your observation of their behavior**: Use specific incidents rather than saying “you always” and other similar phrases.
• **Urge the person to get help**: If your organization has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), offer information about how to access the EAP.
• **Tell the person you will not hide any of their performance problems**: Do not make idle threats. Be willing and able to follow through.
• **Explain outcomes**: Tell the person how their problem affects you and others at work.
• **Reconfirm your concern**: You do not need to have a co-worker admit he/she has a substance problem.
It is important to note, however, that even after confronting a co-worker using these steps, he/she may still be unwilling to accept or acknowledge the alcohol or drug problem. If so, consult your HR representative or supervisor.