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Guidelines from the National Safety Council on the Impact of COVID 19 on Substance Abuse & Mental Health in the Workplace

National Safety Council (NSC) President and CEO Lorraine Martin challenged business leaders across the country to take aggressive action to ensure employee safety from COVID-19. “We all must take care of our employees. They are our greatest asset and they deserve protection, now more than ever. In a recent survey, over 70 percent of NSC member companies indicated they have employees still reporting to work, unable to work remotely. Many of these employees are in critical roles and crucial to supporting the functioning of our society. In partnership with our employees, we as leaders must be vigilant as we grapple with a workplace safety issue we’ve never seen and face the challenge of protecting those on the front lines. First, business leaders cannot forget that the everyday risks their employees face easily can be compounded by the pandemic. Many companies are operating with skeleton crews, which could lead to worker fatigue – an issue that impacts more than 90 percent of employees. Some employees will need proper training on new equipment and operations, so issues like distraction and complacency are important to address. Business leaders must understand that added stress can lead to spikes in substance use disorders, and 75 percent

of businesses have been directly impacted by opioid misuse under usual conditions. Caring about employees' physical *and* mental wellbeing are paramount.”

The National Safety Council offers the follow guidelines regarding policies and procedures related to COVID 19

Prevention of Substance Abuse

Prevention of substance use and misuse, including opioid use and opioid overdose, is complex. There are many root causes and risk factors for addiction (a common name for a substance use disorder).¹ Risk factors are characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of developing a substance use disorder (SUD). Protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of developing a SUD, and reducing a risk factor's impact. However, employees may struggle with opioid misuse or an opioid use disorder (OUD) despite these prevention measures. While employers cannot address all of the risk and protective factors that occur on individual and community levels, employers can protect against workplace risk and enhance workplace protective factors. For some, the COVID-19 pandemic will significantly increase risk factors, including psychological risk factors (pre-existing mental health conditions, such as anxiety or depression and new mental health conditions) and social risk factors (living in a high stress environment, unstable housing, low socioeconomic status, unstable employment).²

Employee Education

Educating the workforce is essential. While employees should be educated on opioids and their risks (see the NSC Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit for more detail), there are specific risks and risky behavior that are more common with the physical distancing limitations enacted due to COVID-19. Coping mechanisms vary from person to person – safe, healthy behaviors and habits (for example, a glass of wine at night) may become more dramatic in times of extreme stress. Help your employees understand SUDs and how their behaviors, even if not typical, can be risky. Many people on prescription medications (including opioids) may be accessing them differently. Regulations allow doctors to prescribe some medications for a longer duration than was typical prior to the pandemic. This may be done to provide more refills or to minimize contact (i.e. starting patients on medications without an in-person appointment). This means a surplus of medications may be present in the house, which can be difficult to manage and keep organized. Other people may not have access to the medications they need or not be able to refill them in a timely manner. More details can be found in “A Checklist for Employees.”

Remind employees to:

- Track their medications and to discuss any concerns with a pharmacist or doctor.
- Communicate with their medical team if they are concerned about medication access, ask their pharmacist if they have any questions about stopping or starting medications and help them understand the potential implications if their medications are opioids.

Workplace Policies

¹ <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/20190718-samhsa-risk-protective-factors.pdf>

² www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/returning-to-resilience-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-behavioral-health

While your Drug-Free Workplace Program (DFWP) is still in effect, it is difficult to monitor employees at home, and drug testing capabilities may be curtailed. Focus time and attention on prevention mechanisms and work with your HR team to identify what policies may need to be temporarily suspended or changed. Communicate any changes with your employees promptly and clearly. Your DFWP will be critical when employees begin to return to work in person, or when the initial COVID-19 restrictions are eased and workplaces shift back towards their previous state. SAMHSA expects an increase in substance use as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may be an issue as people continue to work, return to work or it may develop later on. Managers and supervisors need special guidance on handling employee issues during the pandemic. There are several components to this. Managers and supervisors are likely experiencing extreme levels of stress themselves – they need resources devoted to their mental health and wellbeing.

Employees may have more acute needs and may exhibit more intense behaviors and emotions than typical. Managers and supervisors should be trained or retrained in listening skills, emotional intelligence and/or mental health first aid. Managers should be provided with training to help them recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, mental health issues and substance misuse in team members. They should encourage team members showing these signs to seek help from qualified mental health and/or addiction professionals.

Benefits and Health Care Plans

Medical leave and scheduling policies should be flexible enough for employees to attend medical appointments. This includes mental health services and appointments, as well as treatment for substance use – usage of both of these services may spike both during the COVID-19 crisis and after it has passed.

Workplace Culture

One of the strongest prevention mechanisms an employer can provide is a supportive workplace culture. This can lessen the impact of other factors (such as impacts from COVID-19) that put people more at risk for developing an OUD. If employees feel supported and encouraged to seek help when needed, an early diagnosis can help prevent emerging SUDs from progressing and becoming worse.

Promote a culture of health and wellness. This may seem challenging in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it is very important. Recognize the effects of COVID-19, be honest and open about how this can impact employees and employers alike, provide resources and be flexible. Encourage supervisors to work with their employees to discuss how to best manage schedules and responsibilities during this time. Minimizing stress caused by work is important to promote physical and mental health.

Promote ergonomic and overexertion initiatives to prevent injury and the need for medications. Actively promote healthy behaviors during the day, such as taking scheduled breaks that will benefit both mental and physical health. Acknowledge and address risks for those still working, who may be working overtime or overexerting themselves. Overexertion and fatigue are major drivers of workplace injury, and can lead to substance misuse in an effort to self-medicate or to keep oneself awake.

Create a recovery-friendly workplace. With the expected increase in substance misuse and SUDs amongst the general population, pre-empting the impact on the workplace by reducing stigma

and openly and actively supporting recovery can mitigate the impact on your workplace and encourage employees to seek help more quickly. Connect with the community – understand the landscape of local resources and provide all employees with a list. Some people will not be comfortable discussing substance use or misuse with their employer. This is a good way to reach those people without requiring vulnerability or disclosure. National Safety Council Benefits and Health Care Plans Benefits and health care plans can provide preventative services as well as treatment. All services provided should be confidential, easy to access and easy to use.

Key Recommendations:

- Learn more at Navigating Health Care Benefits and Data, Working with Benefits Providers during COVID-19: Mental Health Issues Checklist and the Employer Role in Mental Health during COVID-19.
- Ensure health care plans cover mental and behavioral health services.
- Provide or increase access to employee assistance programs (EAPs). EAPs are an underutilized tool in providing help to employees and their loved ones who are working through an opioid use disorder. Easy access to support and medical care can prevent early stages of a substance use disorder or a mental health illness from becoming more serious.
- In event of a furlough, or a reduction in work hours offered, ensure employees understand how that impacts their benefits. Make sure this information is offered verbally and in writing. Ensure someone is available to answer questions later, as some employees may not be able to ask all the questions they need after initially receiving information about furloughs or work hour reductions.

Treatment and Recovery during COVID 19

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are complex, with biological, psychological, and social causes and factors that can complicate treatment. However, SUDs are a treatable medical condition, and the odds of recovery are remarkable. In fact, more than 10 percent of Americans live in recovery³. Treatment may include medications, behavioral health counseling and other services to help patients reduce or stop alcohol and other drug use, and address related physical or mental health problems. Learn more about different types of treatment therapies, such as medication assisted treatment (MAT) and behavioral health treatment at Understanding Treatment and Recovery. For most people, use of medications in combination with behavioral health treatment is most effective when recovering from an opioid use disorder (OUD)⁴. Ensuring your healthcare plans cover all types of treatment is critical to ensuring your employees can access the help they need. With COVID-19, there are two angles to consider. One, there may be an increase in employees needing treatment after the initial crisis has passed as a result of problematic substance use during the pandemic, relapse, etc. Planning ahead can prevent higher impacts. Secondly, there may be employees in your workforce who were currently in treatment who may be experiencing decreased or interrupted services.

³ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29055821

⁴ www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment#medications-used-in-mat

Recovery begins when a person regains control over their opioid or substance use disorder and begins to live a healthy, productive life. It is important to remember that:

- Recovery is a personal journey, and is as unique as individual substance use disorders
- Relapse (reoccurrence of the disorder) is a natural part of recovery.
- Recovering from an OUD or SUD may include making significant lifestyle changes that may be difficult to maintain.

This update is based on the following resources available at the NSC website.

Statement from Lorraine M. Martin, president and CEO of the National Safety Council.

<https://www.nsc.org/safety-first-blog/an-epidemic-during-a-pandemic>

Substance Use Prevention and Treatment and Recovery during COVID-19

<https://www.nsc.org/work-safety/safety-topics/coronavirus/mental-health-and-wellbeing>

Additional Resources:

Working With Benefits Providers: Mental Health Issues Checklist

https://www.nsc.org/Portals/0/Documents/NSCDocuments_Advocacy/Safety%20at%20Work/covid-19/checklist-benefits-providers.pdf?ver=2020-04-02-123448-233

NSC Opioids at Work Employer Toolkit

<https://www.nsc.org/pages/prescription-drug-employer-kit>

About the National Safety Council www.nsc.org.

PDFNJ offers our thanks to the National Safety Council (NSC) for providing this information to our members. NSC is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate preventable deaths at work, in homes and communities, and on the road through leadership, research, education and advocacy. Founded in 1913 and chartered by Congress, NSC advances this mission by partnering with businesses, government agencies, elected officials and the public in areas where we can make the most impact.

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The Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey (PDFNJ) is a private 501 (c) (3) not-for profit organization that promotes the prevention of substance abuse throughout the state through media campaigns, school-based programs and community and workplace initiatives. PDFNJ programs are made possible by support from the Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, the New Jersey Department of Human Services, and funding from corporations and foundations. All programs and services provided by PDFNJ are free of charge. For more information visit www.drugfreenj.org or call 973 467-2100.

For Treatment Information

Call 1-844-Reach NJ or visit www.reachnj.gov

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