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Opioid Use Disorder Wreaks Havoc in the Workplace: Here's What Employers Can Do to Help

By Jon O'Brien, Executive Director, Keystone Contractors Association

From my experience, it is not an exaggeration to say the opioid and fentanyl epidemic in Pennsylvania is the public health challenge of our time, and based on construction industry reports, it is clear that New Jersey is in the same predicament. Across our two states and throughout the country, opioid use disorder (OUD) continues to be a crisis that requires our constant attention. Overdose deaths inflict a toll on families, workplaces, communities and state economies. Addressing the crisis from a workplace perspective not only benefits your business, but doing so could be a life-saving initiative for your employee or perhaps one of their family members.

Fortunately, there is some good news to report as we are making progress. In 2022, [224 Americans died each day](#) from an overdose. [Two years later, that number decreased to 150](#). The number of overdoses in the Garden State has been declining as the state expands prevention and harm-reduction programs. Unfortunately, if you focus on New Jersey, the good news may not look so good. According to the New Jersey Department of Health more than seven deaths per day were reported in 2023, which is higher than both national figures (In 2022, 224 deaths averaged to 4.48 per day; and in 2024 the average was 3 overdose deaths per day). You might wonder how did we get to this unfathomable reality and what can we do about it. While I work in

the construction industry and would prefer to stay in my lane, I do think all industries can benefit from some of the practices we have put in place to address the crisis.

The construction industry has long carried higher risks of painful injuries, heavy physical work, and transient employment — a combination that left many workers reliant on prescription painkillers and, later, vulnerable to illicit opioids. Over the past two decades those individual vulnerabilities collided with the rise of synthetic opioids (especially illicit fentanyl) and worsening mental-health stressors, producing outsized overdose and suicide rates among construction trades.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics report “Drug Overdose Mortality by Usual Occupation and Industry” released in August 2023, the construction industry had the highest rate of overdose deaths in 2020, with 130.9 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Public-health tracking shows the epidemic has shifted but not disappeared. While some recent data point to declines in overall overdose deaths, the damage to workers, families and employers is real and ongoing.

Construction is not the only hard-hit industry by the opioid epidemic but national and sector context: construction workers are disproportionately affected. Industry research and workforce analyses show construction accounts for a much larger share of overdose deaths than its share of the workforce — one summary puts construction workers at about 17 percent of overdose deaths among working adults while representing roughly 8 percent of the U.S. workforce. Work injuries that lead to pain treatment are a frequent funnel into prolonged opioid use: one study found a substantial portion of opioid-related overdose deaths were preceded by a work injury. However, all workforce have been impacted by the opioid crisis in significant ways. Other industries hit hard by the harm caused by opioids include: the hospitality industry, food preparation, personal care and support services, and the commercial fishing industry.

Recognizing such devastating losses, the Keystone Contractors Association (KCA), beginning back in 2016, decided to do something to help. Here are some concrete steps that we started taking to provide a foundation of support for employers.

Building a safety culture that addresses substance use

Part of a comprehensive safety culture includes being recovery-friendly workplace. Employers need to communicate openly that OUD is a health condition, not a moral failing and use communication vehicles like toolbox talks and newsletters to reduce stigma. If your company offers Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), make sure it is known that this confidential access to counseling and treatment support is available. If your company does not currently offer EAPs, look into it to see if this employee benefit can work for your company. Take time every so often to review and improve your worker health benefits, ensuring that your health insurance covers evidence-based treatment for substance use disorders. Work with your health plan to streamline access and reduce barriers for workers and their families and make sure to promote your efforts that are expanding and improving your health benefits for your workers. Take the time to engage in educational programs to raise awareness about the harmful effects that occur from the misuse and abuse of opioids, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs so as to prevent a SUD from developing among your employees.

Supervisory training to build and sustain a safety culture

Equip your managers with the education and training needed to spot early warning signs of misuse or impairment; organizations like the National Safety Council offer excellent training programs for supervisors. Companies should also train their workforce leaders in conducting an understanding and compassionate conversation to improve the chances of connecting workers to the assistance they need should they have a mental health issue or a substance use problem. Make continuous safety training part of your agenda. Invite speakers to your company and run safety campaigns to highlight important issues.

Connect your safety culture to community and industry programs that can help your workplace

As mentioned earlier, nine years ago we made the concentrated effort to increase and improve our opioid awareness training and resources. Once we began on this course of action, I was blown away by how many professionals and organizations that wanted to connect with us to see how they could help. There are trade associations for every industry, which might be a good place to start to see what resources they offer to improve your safety culture.

Construction Opioid Awareness Week

KCA's major collaborative industry-wide initiative is Construction Opioid Awareness Week which takes place during the last week of July. KCA works with the Eastern Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters and the General Building Contractors Association, other associations, legislators, community leaders and other stakeholders to promote the event and raise greater awareness on the issue. Among the many activities that are part of Construction Opioid Awareness Week are:

- sharing turnkey materials employers can adopt such as daily five-minute toolbox talks on OUD topics
- distributing naloxone toolkits at jobsites and encouraging that naloxone be kept on construction sites and in contractor offices at all times
- distributing "Warn Me" stickers for workers' insurance cards to encourage healthcare providers to discuss opioid issues
- promoting the 988 mental health and suicide prevention hotline
- organizing "Drug Take Back" events to combat prescription drug abuse

Taking part in Construction Opioid Awareness Week is about protecting our greatest asset, our people. By raising awareness and reducing stigma, we take a stand for safety, recovery and a stronger workforce. State senator of Pennsylvania and member of the Labor & Industry Committee, noted that "The construction industry's physically demanding nature often leads to injuries and pain management challenges, creating pathways to addiction. Through legislative action and community partnerships, we're making real progress in saving lives, but our work isn't done. This awareness week represents our commitment to protecting the hardworking men and women who build our Commonwealth."

KCA's door is always open and we have spoken to many organizations and companies across the country about recognizing an opioid awareness week. This outreach has been from both construction and non-construction entities.

KCA has been recognized an early adopter when it comes to opioid awareness education and training, due to the fact that we started on this journey in 2016. However, that does not mean we know everything about the subject matter – we are always exploring new ways to protect workers from the harms of opioids. Much work remains, but we hope other industries from Pennsylvania,

New Jersey and beyond will join us in improving our efforts to stop the senseless and tragic deaths of so many from our communities.

About the Author and the Keystone Contractors Association Jon O'Brien is the Executive Director of the [Keystone Contractors Association](#), serving in this role since 2016. At the KCA, he oversees this commercial construction trade association that is active throughout most of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. KCA is renowned for providing the construction industry labor relations, safety services, workforce development, and community service. Mr. O'Brien is also co-host of the Building PA Podcast, a construction podcast established in 2020. He can be reached at Jon@KeystoneContractors.com.

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For treatment Information call 1-844-Reach NJ or visit www.reachnj.gov

988 – This suicide & crisis lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day.