

Risk*topics*

Writing An Effective Drug Policy

Overview

A drug policy needs to be comprehensive and clearly written if it is to be accepted and supported by employees. The written policy must state the company's overall position on drug use. It is also very important to address the issue of alcohol use and abuse as it pertains to the workplace. The policy statement should reflect the attitudes and ideals that are inherent to that particular industry and company. The organization should also clearly state its positions on job performance as it relates to drug use and on co-worker and public safety issues.

The Written Policy

The first step in writing a policy for drugs in the workplace is a consultation with the employees themselves. Their input will give management new insight into the general mood of the workers and in many cases will serve to guarantee their compliance. Communication and input from all applicable local labor unions are also essential. For many large businesses, individual employee input may not be practical, thus making unions the most qualified representative of the workers. For additional information, management should also contact security, employee assistance professionals, and occupational safety and health representatives.

Drug policies, whether they include testing or not, are still controversial. It is generally accepted that drug policies and testing programs are cost effective. The feeling is that the occasional legal challenges made by employees that are characteristic of the proactive drug policy stance is less of a threat than the much larger potential losses from not initiating a program at all. By ignoring the problem and waiting first for an incident, the company leaves itself wide open to costly suits from the general public.

The second component of policy development centers around deterrence. The procedure for drug testing and internal investigations, if any, needs to be spelled out in very clear language, along with the consequences of positive results. All mandatory treatment requirements and adverse personnel actions should be detailed. There should be no doubt in an employee's mind about the type and severity of consequences associated with drug use that affects work behavior or drug-related activities at the worksite. Employers should make it clear that no illegal activities will be tolerated at the workplace.

The final portion of the drug policy deals with treatment. It should be stated clearly that it is the responsibility of the employee to seek treatment for addiction

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problems. The employer then needs to detail the types of employee assistance programs that are available. Finally, when composing the written policy, the aspect of confidentiality should be stressed. The identities of employees in treatment and all test results should be confidential. Procedures for handling privacy violations should also be reviewed.

Legal Issues

After the policy has been written, it is important that the company ask legal counsel to thoroughly review the policies and procedures to assure compliance with all local, state, and federal laws, as well as all applicable union contracts. Supervisors and managers should be thoroughly educated on what can legally be said to employees and what action can be taken.

The Supervisor's Role

Before providing the drug policy to employees, it should be explained to the supervisors, who should be trained to identify and document unusual performance or bizarre behavior that might result from drug use. Supervisors should also be given information on the psychological and physiological aspects of addiction, as well as other pertinent issues, such as confidentiality, drug testing, drug trafficking, legal issues, and employee drug education.

A clear policy statement in combination with supervisor training will allow for the identification, intervention, and treatment of drug dependent workers in a manner consistent with the law and good personnel practices.

Announcement and Application of Policy

Before implementation, the policy should be formally announced and explained to employees, their families, and unions. It is wise to ask each employee to read the policy. In addition, "help" stations or numbers should be set up for the purpose of policy clarification. Establish a time lag of approximately one month between announcement of the policy and actual implementation. During this time, a reliable laboratory can be chosen that understands the drug screening program and company policy guidelines.

Summary

Keeping drugs out of the workplace acts to reduce the number of drug-related accidents affecting co-workers or the general public. The use of drug testing programs can be a valuable tool if programs are well planned and executed. Drug testing helps reduce drug use in the workplace and can also help employees who use drugs receive help and return to productive lives. Important factors in selling a drug policy include: legal issues; communication guidelines; training workers' supervisors in the use of an EAP program.

References

1. *Guidelines for a Drug Free Workplace.*
U.S. Department of Justice.
2. VinColi, Jeffery W. "Drug Testing Programs in Industry." *Professional Safety*, October 1988.

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