

How Can HR Address the Opioid Crisis?

HRExchangeNetwork | Francesca Di Meglio | January 3, 2023

Employers – and specifically the Human Resources leaders who support them – are seeking ways to address workers’ mental health and wellness, which includes the crisis of substance use disorder. The opioid crisis in the United States is widely covered in the news. While people want to address the issue, they often have no idea where to begin.



Hans Morefield, CEO of CHES Health, which is a digital health company that is addressing the addiction crisis by providing access to prevention, intervention, and recovery options, recently shared his thoughts for HR leaders with HR Exchange Network.

HREN: What should employers know about the addiction crisis that the United States is experiencing? What can they do as human resources leaders?

HM: What employers can do is take a more active role in trying to help their employees get support for themselves or for their loved ones. Many employers offer employees

access to employee assistance programs, for example, but it's up to the individual to look up the details of their EAP program, contact their EAP vendor, go to their EAP vendor website, and explore resources. Many don't realize what's available to them, and many may not be prompted to really address an issue and seek assistance.

We've created the ability to push out a link to employees to answer screening questions about your substance use disorder (or the disorder of someone in your family) anonymously. As a result of your responses, you will receive access to resources that could be helpful, including things like how to talk to loved ones about substance use disorder, moderation strategies, and treatment resources.

HREN: Anonymity is an important aspect of this both for legal reasons and for the obvious reasons that people are more likely to ask for help that way. Can you elaborate?

HM: In the United States, the process of screening individuals for consumption of alcohol or use of drugs really only occurs in a physician's office. When individuals come in for a wellness visit for a checkup, their clinician, nurse, or doctor, presents them with a bunch of questions. A couple of them are related to drug and alcohol consumption. Typically, the clinician doesn't really want to talk about substance use; it's a difficult conversation. They may not feel like they're well-equipped to respond if the individual expresses that he or she is struggling with

substance abuse. They're not going to know what to say. They're not going to know what resources to offer them.

Of course, the individual who's answering the questions is often going to say, 'Well, I really don't want to talk about my substance use.' That single screening opportunity, which is where the vast majority of Americans answer such questions, doesn't yield much. All the data shows that individuals will answer anonymous self-screening questionnaires more honestly.

HREN: Where do you draw the line? What is the responsibility of the employer? When are you overstepping your bounds? How can HR leaders be careful about that?

HM: That's a great question. If someone clicks on a link, and the screener says, '...brought to you by your employer,' individuals will ask, 'Is this really anonymous?' Employers can partner with organizations in their community. For example, we work with a treatment provider in Wisconsin that is also the prevention specialists for the community. Part of what an employer can do in that community is say, 'Hey, here's a resource, from this community, go to its website, and answer this anonymous survey for screening.' So, it doesn't feel like you're answering your employer's questionnaire. Instead, the employer is bringing workers to a resource.

HREN: How do you make the case for employers providing help with substance abuse recovery?

HM: Around 8% of Americans struggle with substance use disorder. If you're an employer, the likelihood is that someone in your company is struggling with addiction. Less than 10% of them are in treatment. So, it's going to be someone with untreated substance use disorder. What's going to be even more common, of course, is that that one individual is the spouse or parent of someone, who struggles with addiction.

HREN: I think that many employers previously have looked at it as though there's something wrong with that employee, and it's cause for termination. Do you think that this is going to require a shift in mindset about substance abuse?

HM: There's always more stigma to overcome. At the same time, with COVID and the obvious rise in the prevalence and awareness of mental health issues and of substance use as another kind of mental health disorder, [there is more understanding].

Employers are challenged with hiring and attrition. So, they've made an investment in the workforce. The message we're receiving, loud and clear, is that employers recognize that substance use disorder is a medical condition. It's a behavioral health condition that can be treated. It can happen to anyone. I think there's more openness. HR and employers should address the crisis to offer resources, and not just look at it as a human failing or cause for termination. That's not going to be a winning strategy for an employer anymore.