



Spotlight on Substance Use Prevention, Harm Reduction, and Recovery in Construction

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Over the past decade, the construction industry has made meaningful progress addressing workplace mental health. A majority of the attention has focused on suicide prevention. In July 2016 the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) released data showing the construction industry has a high rate of suicide. Shortly thereafter the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention was borne out of this crisis.

A decade later, there remains substantially less focus in workplaces on addressing substance use prevention and drug overdose response. This gap continues to have an impact on the construction workforce and their families.

I encounter this gap firsthand in my work with SAFE Project, a national nonprofit. In my experience, three major factors help explain this gap:

1. Stigma surrounding substance use remains deeper and more persistent than stigma surrounding mental health.
2. Many employers rely primarily on Drug-Free Workplace policies without recognizing that a strict "zero-tolerance" culture may discourage employees or family members from seeking help.
3. Employers with Department of Transportation (DOT)-regulated, safety-sensitive positions often focus on compliance requirements without fully incorporating education about prevention, treatment, and recovery resources.

A Clear Call to Action

A change in perspective is needed. This is not a matter of either/or; rather, this is a both/and opportunity. Construction employers can both maintain focus on requirements of the business AND provide support to

employees and family members needing care and support.

SAFE Project is a national nonprofit working to Stop the Addiction Fatality Epidemic. SAFE Project is focused on expanding education, reducing stigma, and helping workplaces build practical substance use education, overdose prevention, and recovery support strategies. Through workplace initiatives, alcohol and naloxone education, community partnerships, and accessible resources, SAFE Project helps employers move from awareness to action through practical education, overdose prevention strategies, and recovery support resources.

This article addresses three interrelated topics to provide a more complete picture of what workplaces can do to focus on prevention, harm reduction, and recovery strategies. The workplace remains an untapped opportunity to educate employees about substance use prevention, harm reduction, and recovery.

Stigma Remains High On Addiction and Recovery

Stigma is a major barrier to persons needing help seeking or actually receiving help. Stigma is a seemingly invisible but very real force. Stigma is the negative judgment or bias that causes people to blame, shame, or distance themselves from others experiencing substance use or mental health challenges. In workplaces, stigma contributes to social isolation and increases potential for bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

Current research from June 2026 from [The Addiction Policy Institute and Gallup](#) revealed, "nearly 1 in 4 U.S. adults (23%) either disagree or do not know that addiction is a health condition." The survey shows that misunderstanding

continues to surround perceptions and beliefs about substance use, addiction, and recovery.

70% of individuals with substance use disorder are of working age (16 to 64) and employed in the US workforce. The construction industry workforce has high rates of heavy and binge drinking, substance use disorder, and fatal overdoses. Yet, a small percentage of workplaces are proactively communicating about substance use prevention resources. Many employers do not know where to start.

[The #NoShame Pledge](#) is a free and accessible tool that helps reinforce the importance of stigma reduction in promoting recovery. SAFE Project promotes the use of the #NoShame Pledge as a means of educating workplace and community leaders that addiction is a treatable, chronic health condition and that there are multiple pathways of recovery. The #NoShame Pledge is a straightforward way for leaders and organizations to promote stigma reduction and open communication on supports and services available through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and/or company, and/or union-sponsored health benefits. By promoting the #NoShame Pledge, employers can begin teaching employees how to become recovery allies.

September Is National Recovery Month: Celebrating Hope and Resilience

Every September, National Recovery Month recognizes the millions of Americans living in recovery from substance use disorders and mental health conditions. Recovery Month highlights the effectiveness of treatment, peer support, and recovery services

while celebrating the achievements of individuals who have worked hard to rebuild their lives.

For construction employers facing ongoing workforce shortages, supporting recovery is also a workforce strategy. Employees in recovery are skilled workers whose experience and resilience strengthen teams when employers create environments where they can succeed.

Recognizing Recovery Month can help organizations:

- Reduce stigma surrounding substance use and mental health conditions.
- Encourage employees to seek help when needed.
- Highlight available Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and behavioral health resources in company- and/or union-sponsored health plans.
- Share recovery success stories and messages of hope.
- Promote a workplace culture where employees feel supported rather than judged, thereby creating inclusion and belonging.

One of the most important messages of Recovery Month is that recovery is a common experience. Millions of people successfully manage their health conditions while leading productive, fulfilling lives at work, at home, and in their communities. Recovery Month helps shift the conversation from crisis and tragedy to hope, resilience, and possibility.

Continued Focus on Overdose Prevention and Reversal Is Needed

In August 2023, the CDC released data of fatal overdose rates by industry and occupation. Construction had the highest rate of overdose deaths among 19 major industries. Several construction trades were among the top 10 by occupation. However, there has been good news as reported by the Center for Construction Research and Training (CPWR): overdose deaths among construction workers declined from 2023 to 2024. According to CPWR, drug-related overdose deaths among construction workers dropped

28.8% from 2023 to 2024, falling from 15,900 to 11,300. The rate declined from 135.0 to 94.8 per 100,000 workers.

Time for a reality check: The industry's fatal overdose rate is over 10 times higher than the occupational fatality rate of 9.2 per 100,000 workers. The work is not done; there is still a long way to go. Expanding the availability of naloxone in construction workplaces and worksites is not an option, it is an imperative.

When naloxone became approved for over-the-counter use in March 2023, stocking it on jobsites had slow uptake. Some employers hesitated due to liability concerns or uncertainty about how it would be perceived. That mindset is changing and adoption is rising. More employers are treating naloxone as a standard safety measure, similar to first aid supplies or automated external defibrillators. It is recommended to consider naloxone from the lens of emergency preparedness and safety to be prepared for every type of emergency.

This shift is grounded in a simple reality: almost 10% of all occupational fatalities stem from overdoses. Overdoses can happen anywhere, including on jobsites, in company vehicles, or during breaks. When they happen, timing is critical. Naloxone can reverse an opioid overdose within minutes and restore breathing. Keeping naloxone readily available and ensuring workers are trained to use it can be the difference between life and death. Bottom-line: naloxone saves lives!

Conclusion: Action Steps for Employers

With September's focus on Recovery Month, all industry leaders are asked to challenge the status quo by speaking out against the stigma associated with substance use and mental health.

The action steps below are designed to provide leaders with practical ways to strengthen prevention, harm reduction, and recovery efforts while creating a healthier workplace culture.

1. Reduce stigma through action

Leadership behaviors and everyday practices all shape workplace culture. When stigma is reduced, workers are more likely to seek help early.

2. Support recovery as a workforce strategy

Recovery-friendly workplaces are not just supportive, they are effective. When workers have access to treatment and feel supported, retention improves, and risk decreases.

3. Strengthen pathways to care

Employee Assistance Programs, community partnerships, union supports, and peer recovery specialists, all need to be visible, accessible, and easy to navigate

4. Keep communications and education ongoing

One-time messages and training sessions are not enough. Ongoing conversations about jobsite demands and mental health, injuries and opioid risks, and safety practices, help reinforce prevention and keep safety top of mind.

5. Make naloxone a standard safety resource

Every workplace and work site should have naloxone readily available. Just as important, workers need to be trained and feel confident using it in an emergency.

SAFE Project stands with the construction industry to educate and share resources to help employers with strategies on substance use prevention, overdose reversal, and recovery. For additional information and resources, visit the SAFE Workplaces homepage: <https://www.safeproject.us/workplaces/>

Citations

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