

**The Bulletin** bendbulletin.com



70°

**LOCAL**



**Now offering 3 Home Phone plans!**

As low as \$18.95 per month. Plus, FREE installation!

Limited time offer. Some restrictions apply

**Bend Broadband**

## Chamber goal: Drug-free Bend

### Bend Chamber of Commerce to help local workplaces banish drugs

By Anna Sowa / *The Bulletin*

Bend businesses need drug-free workplace policies, according to a panel of Bend Chamber of Commerce members hoping to help guide companies through the process.

The health care committee of the chamber's Government Affairs Council is planning a free community event in March to discuss methods for establishing a drug-free workplace. Workshop information and legal and financial resources for funding drug-free workplace policies also will be presented.

Statewide, workplace drug use is on the rise.

In the first half of 2005, 8.3 percent of Central Oregon employees tested positive for drugs, according to Grant Beardsley, clinical toxicologist and Oregon Medical Laboratories drug-testing services manager.

Statewide, 6.9 percent tested positive for drugs.

Both rates were for non-federally mandated tests.

The year before, the state's positive drug-testing rate was 5.3 percent, said Beardsley, who did not have 2004 data for Central Oregon.

Seventy percent of Oregon drug users are employed, according to Beardsley, and methamphetamine use is climbing among them.

"It is a problem," he said. "We're testing 15,000 specimens per month and in Central Oregon, 1.5 percent test positive for methamphetamines."

Of all drugs that show up in urine tests, marijuana is the most common, Beardsley said. Second is methamphetamine, followed by cocaine.

Bend officials want to make the city a role model for successful drug-free workplace policies, said Ron Gallinat, health care committee member and representative of Central Oregon Employee Benefits LLC.

The goal is for all of Des-chutes County to be drug-free.

The chamber expects some opposition, however, from local businesses worried about the cost of drug-free policies.

"Most businesses think (drug-testing policies) are expensive and time-consuming," Gallinat said. "We're bringing the tools together to make it an easier process."

Some of those tools include outlining a drug-free workplace plan, instructions for establishing legal support of a plan, and methods of establishing pre-employment and "for cause" drug-testing policies. "For cause" policies allow testing on suspicion of drug use prompted by a workplace accident or suspicious job performance.

The community launch event in March will include a question-and-answer session, panel discussion and testimonials from local businesses that have implemented drug-free policies.

One of those is The Riverhouse hotel, which requires all new employees to pass a nine-panel drug test and recently began charging applicants \$35 to cover testing, said controller Teresa Asher.

Asher guesses 1 in 25 applicants fails the test. That's a huge improvement over eight months ago, when 80 percent of applicants failed per week, she said.

The Riverhouse's no-tolerance policy has paid off by increasing the quality of applicants and reducing the incidence of workplace accidents, Asher said.

Employees seem to like it, too.

"People who do not do drugs do not want to work with people who do," Asher said. "This is not a big town, so if you hire people who do drugs, you'll just end up with them. And they're typically unreliable workers."

The Riverhouse's attorney drafted the drug-free policy to protect workers' rights, Asher added, acknowledging the tests are limited to detecting the most serious drugs.

"Meth is the worst thing right now for workplaces and it only stays in the system 48 hours," Asher said.

Marijuana is the most common drug found in their failed tests.

Depending on methamphetamine dosage, the drug can be detected two to four days after use, Beardsley said.

Marijuana's active ingredient, THC, stays in the body for weeks, even a month, in heavy users. Frequent users accumulate THC faster than their bodies can eliminate it, Beardsley said. Infrequent users can rid their bodies of the drug a couple days after use, he added.

Local businesses worry that a drug-free policy will shrink the city's already meager pool of qualified labor, according to members of the chamber's health care committee, which is in the early stages of developing a citywide drug-free workplace plan.

President Mike Schmidt. "But (employers) have to think beyond just today. This issue is so critical and there's a financial downside to not having a drug-free workplace: the cost in legal, medical and workers' compensation fees."

Establishing a drug-free reputation will keep the highest-quality workers and deter those with potential substance-abuse problems, said Mimi Bushman, representative of Workdrugfree, an Oregon Nurses Foundation program that promotes statewide drug-free workplaces.

"Why would they hire a problem?" Bushman said. "If you, as a business, are not on board with these policies, you will have to hire candidates that nobody else will hire."

Besides keeping qualified workers, employers could save money by instituting a drug-free policy, Bushman said, citing workers' compensation and health insurance. They also would have fewer job accidents, less absenteeism and lower turnover.

Bushman hopes Central Oregon communities will adopt the Oregon Business Plan's initiative to educate and mobilize businesses to combat workplace substance abuse. The drug-free workplace pilot plan Bushman presented to the chamber costs \$4,800.

That money would have to be raised in the community.

Sadly, workplace drug use is common in many communities, Bushman said.

Certified drug-free workplaces account for only 25 percent of all Oregon workplaces, she said. The goal of Workdrugfree is to have 75 percent of Oregon's workplace drug-free by 2008.

Anna Sowa can be reached at 541-383-0304 or at [asowa@bendbulletin.com](mailto:asowa@bendbulletin.com).