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LOCAL



Crook drug-free program tackles area workplaces

By Anna Sowa / *The Bulletin*

Prineville and Crook County officials soon hope to remove drug users and abusers from the area's work force through an areawide drug-free workplace program.

The program would help businesses form and implement policies, addressing what some say is more drug use - primarily of methamphetamines - throughout Central Oregon.

Advocates say drug-testing policies reduce a company's liability and help its reputation, while civil liberties groups warn that drug testing has potential legal land mines.

To drum up support and increase awareness and education, the Prineville-Crook County Chamber of Commerce is hosting a June 16 public meeting about its Drug Free Prineville-Crook County program. The program is aimed at helping local businesses adopt drug-free workplace policies and to see their benefit - even to small businesses that might be struggling to find and keep workers.

In a Crook County Commission on Children and Families survey of 40 county businesses, almost all businesses said they were drug-free, but only 60 percent said they have drug-free workplace policies and 40 percent said they do drug testing. All reported that a drug-free workplace policy would benefit their business.

"Every business is arriving at the conclusion that if they don't have (a drug-testing policy), they will be conspicuous by its absence," said Prineville-Crook County Chamber of Commerce President John Boylen. "We have a work force that's affected by drug abuse, so if we increase the number of businesses doing testing, those employees will choose not to work there, which will have a huge effect on the community."

Seventy percent of drug users are employed, according to Oregon Medical Laboratories clinical toxicologist Grant Beardsley. In Central Oregon, 8.4 percent of job applicants tested positive for drugs in 2005, the most recent data. That's higher than the state average of 6.3 percent, according to Beardsley.

At Prineville's Contact Lumber Co., the instance of positive pre-employment drug-test results has increased in recent years, said Human Resources Director Gene Schmidt.

"We used to have (a) 1 or 2 percent positive rate," Schmidt said. "Now, we have 15 percent testing

positive."

Schmidt said his company has had a drug-testing policy for at least 12 years. The 650-member business does pre-employment, post-accident and random drug testing, Schmidt said. It costs about \$53 per person to drug-test and 5 percent of the staff are randomly tested every month.

"We're trying to clean up our community and our county," said Schmidt, who will be chamber president next year. "This may cause a reduction in available workers, but as the whole community cleans up, it will be a boon to everybody."

With unemployment numbers low in Central Oregon - 6.6 percent in Crook County in April - some business owners worry that drug testing will further erode their ability to find and retain qualified workers.

Dale Cross, owner of Sunset Stoves in Prineville, worries that enforcing a drug-free workplace policy will tighten the labor market, but says it's worth it to keep drug users out of his business.

Sunset Stoves has 15 to 20 employees who are subject to for-cause testing - where they're tested if under suspicion of using drugs - and Cross hopes to add pre-employment testing.

At Prineville Heating & Cooling, office manager Marilyn Capehart said drug-testing all applicants would cut down on available employees, but her business can't afford the liability of hiring workers who abuse drugs.

"... We just don't want to hire people on drugs," Capehart said. "We are finding it's hard to get help, but you gotta do what you gotta do."

The Bend Chamber of Commerce also is working on a drug-free workplace initiative. It launched a kickoff event in March and is hosting a workshop June 22 on writing a drug-free workplace policy.

Possible pitfalls

Jann Carson, associate director of the Portland branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, warns against companies adopting drug-testing policies without considering possible side-effects.

Privacy issues are a major factor in drug-testing cases, she said, especially if the test is perceived to control an employee's actions outside the workplace.

"Just because the law allows it doesn't mean it's right," Carson said. "To require every employee to test for drugs turns the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' on its head."

Some issues Carson says employers should consider:

Is drug-testing the most effective way to deal with drug abuse? What is the test telling you? "It's not telling you if someone is impaired or if they can do their job or not," she said.

Do you want a drug-free workplace or a safe workplace? Drug tests involve employees revealing very private information about themselves, which could result in employees feeling they're not trusted.

legal prescription drugs.

Carson recommends employers consider other tests than random drug testing and pre-employment testing, such as impairment tests and for-cause tests. Everyone should consider the pros and cons of implementing the drug-testing tool, she said. Many tests are not foolproof and Carson said they don't accurately show who is abusing drugs in a way that is impairing his or her work performance.

"I think this is a false sense of security employers are operating under," Carson said. "I think we have bought into a panacea that drug testing will solve all our problems, but we do give up an element of privacy when we do it."

Anna Sowa can be reached at 383-0304 or at asowa@bendbulletin.com.