

 **DHS News**
Oregon Department of Human Services

500 Summer St. NE E25, Salem, OR 97301-1098
Ph.: (503) 947-5050 • Fax: (503) 947-5461 • <http://egov.oregon.gov/DHS>

June 13, 2007

Oregon employers expanding number of drug-free worksites

This guest opinion is by Bob Nikkel, Oregon Department of Human Services assistant director for addictions and mental health, and Sid Smith, president of Forest Grove Lumber Co. in McMinnville. Photos are attached.

(The initiative to expand the number of drug-free workplaces is active in **Clackamas, Clatsop, Crook, Deschutes, Douglas, Jackson, Linn, Marion, Multnomah and Yamhill** counties. Journalists interested in reporting a business story may obtain local contact information from Workdrugfree's executive director, Mimi Bushman, at 503-293-0011 ext. 336.)

Length: 560words.

By Bob Nikkel and Sid Smith

It sounded like labor chaos at the Willamette Valley-based Lumber Company.

Employees were terminated after using company equipment for drug deals. Company property was being stolen and machinery as well as lumber products suffered damage. Vehicles and equipment went unchecked and the local newspaper even named a company employee as a drug dealer.

And workers compensation costs nearly tripled.

But after Forest Grove Lumber Company in McMinnville adopted and enforced a drug-free workplace policy, the company reduced costs for medical claims, workers compensation and emergency room visits. Since 2002, the company expanded from 85 employees to 140.

This is an example of a growing Oregon trend of drug-free worksites, supported by an Oregon Department of Human Services initiative to dramatically increase the number by the end of 2008.

So far, participating business organizations in 10 counties are helping employers protect their enterprises, employees and customers from workplace hazards resulting from alcohol abuse and illegal drug use. The employers are in Clackamas, Clatsop, Crook, Deschutes, Douglas, Jackson, Linn, Marion, Multnomah and Yamhill counties.

The data tells a story: Although only 13 percent of Oregon businesses had comprehensive drug-free policies in 2006, the policies covered 31 percent of Oregon workers. This tells us larger companies are investing in drug-free worksites while most smaller companies are not.

The DHS initiative, managed by Tualatin-based contractor Workdrugfree, helps small businesses overcome barriers such as perceived high cost with technical assistance including a model policy, training sessions, names of local resources and employer success stories.

Largely unknown to the general public, many companies report having great difficulty in finding enough potential employees who can pass a pre-employment drug test. Drug use is such a big issue some Oregon employers refuse to test their employees for fear of losing up to half their workforce.

But the savings produced by a drug-free workforce are so great one workers compensation insurer, Liberty Northwest, now offers a 5 percent premium discount to employers enforcing drug-free worksites with a written policy, drug testing, education of employees, training of supervisors and a disciplinary process for those who test positive.

In Crook and Marion counties, employers with drug-free policies work with firms that don't. In every participating county, frequent workshops are held for employers. Several Portland lawyers assist employers without charge.

The operator of an Eastern Oregon restaurant that went drug-free reported he recouped drug-testing costs in the first six months through increased productivity, higher-quality job applicants and an end to thefts from cars in his parking lot. After instituting a drug-free policy, a Southern Oregon company reported significantly fewer applicants failed drug tests.

Across the state, more than 30 companies also have signed up to offer speakers to classes of high school juniors and seniors about how drug use limits job and career options.

The initiative continues to sign up new business groups. Employer organizations interested in becoming pilot sites and high school teachers wanting to invite employers to speak to classes may call Workdrugfree's Mimi Bushman at 503-293-0011 ext. 336. Workdrugfree is a program of Oregon Nurses Foundation.

An officer of the McMinnville company is blunt in summing up the argument for drug-free worksites: "If you don't have a sufficient deterrent," he says, "drug users will own your company. Our drug-free policy enhanced our workplace productivity, which made a positive impact on our year-end profitability."

Bob Nikkel is Oregon Department of Human Services assistant director for addictions and mental health. He may be contacted at robert.e.nikkel@state.or.us. Sid Smith is president of Forest Grove Lumber Co. in McMinnville.

#