

State Opens Effort To Triple Number Of Drug-Free Workplaces By 2008

by Bend Weekly News Sources

"Our vision is to improve the competitiveness of the Oregon workforce," said Don Skundrick, a Jackson County business executive and employer task force chair for Workdrugfree, a Tualatin-based nonprofit with which the Oregon Department of Human Services is contracting. "This is intended to help employers overcome the three biggest obstacles to drug-free work sites â€" lack of expertise, fear of the cost and not knowing how their workforces would be affected."

Skundrick said a 2004 Oregon Business Plan bus tour found employers in five of the nine communities visited identified drug use as a key obstacle to hiring otherwise qualified workers. He said some small businesses have reported applicants failing drug tests at rates of 60 percent to 80 percent and a few this year reported failure rates as high as 90 percent.

The drug-free workplace initiative is an element of the Oregon Business Plan, a 12-point strategy that state business leaders have crafted to strengthen the state's commerce, payrolls and economy.

In the pilot communities, Workdrugfree will assist the chamber-led efforts by giving local employers technical assistance in writing and adopting drug-free policies, training supervisors and educating employees. Businesses experienced with drug-free policies will serve as mentors, and participating employers will receive discounts on employee assistance programs and on drug analyses performed by the state's two federally certified labs.

"This is more than a critical workforce initiative promoting worksite safety, employee health and business productivity," said Karen Wheeler, DHS addictions policy manager. "By ensuring that workers are drug-free, businesses also help to ensure safety of their customers and the well-being of their employees' families and communities."

Wheeler said the \$185,000-a-year initiative is part of DHS's overall effort to reduce the harmful consequences to individuals and society of alcohol and other drugs, tobacco and problem gambling. Progress in meeting the initiative's goal will be tracked by the Oregon Employment Department.

Skundrick said a related element is working with the Oregon Department of Education to ensure students learn not only about drugs' harmful health consequences but also that drugs can hurt one's ability to get or keep a job.

"This is a business-to-business effort," Skundrick said. "The best way to persuade employers to adopt and enforce drug-free policies is to have drug-free businesses show them the short-term costs are outweighed by long-term savings and profitability." He said Central Point-based LTM Inc., where he is vice president, has had drug-free policies in force for its 800 employees since the late 1980s.

Mimi Bushman of Workdrugfree, DHS's contractor, says it has been estimated that a participating business with fewer than 10 employees could spend less than \$500 initially to craft its policy, train a supervisor, join an employee assistance program and conduct three drug tests. "That is far less than the thousands an employer could spend on employee absenteeism or accidents, hiring and training replacement workers, and possibly incurring lawsuits and other risks resulting from employee drug use," she said.