

Workplace Experiences and Outcomes Related to Participation in the Flight Attendant Drug and Alcohol Program: An Exploratory Study

Jodi Jacobson Frey, PhD and Rachel Liccardo, MSW
University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Social Work

Heather Healy, MSW
Association of Flight Attendants-CSW, AFL-CIO

Lauren Bloom, MPP
University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Social Work

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Contact at: Phone: (703) 416-0060

Website: www.easna.org Address: P.O. Box 3146, Norfolk, VA 23514

ABSTRACT. *The purpose of this study was to explore flight attendants experiences with the Flight Attendant Drug and Alcohol Program (FADAP) with a focus on workplace outcomes from a national sample. The researchers surveyed 216 flight attendants who participated in FADAP and subsequently returned to work. The researchers then conducted in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of these flight attendants (N=12) who in addition to completing treatment through FADAP, had returned to work for at least 6 months. Results suggest that participation in FADAP plays an important role in helping flight attendants enter and sustain recovery from alcohol and other drugs (AOD). This study helped shape a new program management system that FADAP uses today to track workplace outcomes related to program participation.*

Introduction

This study, conducted by University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Social Work, evaluated workplace outcomes from

participation in the Flight Attendant Drug and Alcohol Program (FADAP). Managed by a union representing flight attendants, FADAP is a workplace-based peer assistance program that has provided drug and alcohol prevention and early intervention services since September 2010 to all flight attendants, regardless of employer or affiliation. Over time, airline employers have become more interested in outcomes from workplace-based programs due to the varied physically and mentally challenging, and often complex, roles flight attendants must perform to ensure passenger safety and satisfaction.

While clinical outcomes among flight attendants in treatment have been studied, today's employers are increasingly interested in workplace outcomes such as job performance, absenteeism, and customer service, in addition to clinical outcomes.^{1,2,3,4} Prior research has identified general workplace measures that can be used to

assess work-related outcomes such as productivity and overall work performance, but they have not been tested as an outcome measure for alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment for flight attendants in recovery. Therefore, the current study was designed to explore flight attendants' experiences with FADAP from a workplace perspective, in addition to assessing their work performance before treatment and during early recovery. Results would be used to inform FADAP managers about how to reengineer their data management systems and processes to better track work performance outcomes over time. Additionally, results from this study can be used as a reference or starting point to understand the connection between direct Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services and workplace outcomes among other regulated industries and the broader EAP field.

Methods

The current study utilized a mixed methods sequential (quantitative-qualitative) research design to investigate flight attendants' experiences and work-related outcomes.⁵ After receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board, flight attendants who participated in FADAP from September 2010 through February 28, 2013 were asked to complete an online anonymous survey to assess outcomes before and after completing FADAP-recommended AOD treatment (Study 1). The survey was administered at one time point and flight attendants reported abstaining from AOD use between one month to over one year. Then, the researchers interviewed a sub-sample of the larger sample who completed the survey to further assess experiences of flight attendants who not only completed FADAP treatment, but also had returned to flying and had at least six months of recovery time (Study 2). Flight attendants

in the sub-sample reported abstaining from AOD use between seven months to three years at the time of the survey. Flight attendants who completed the survey were issued a \$15.00 electronic gift certificate for their time. Flight attendants who completed the phone interviews were given a \$50.00 gift certificate as an incentive to participate.

Study 1: Online Survey of Flight Attendants

Using an online, anonymous survey, the researchers assessed how flight attendants who had used FADAP in the past self-rated various workplace outcomes before and after seeking treatment for AOD.

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The population included all flight attendants who used FADAP for AOD from September 2010 through February 28, 2013 (N=216, from 22 airlines). During the summer of 2013, flight attendants were contacted by email and asked to complete the online survey. Fifty-two flight attendants completed the survey for a response rate of 24.1%. The mean age of survey participants was 46 years old, ranging from 25 to 65 years old. A little more than half of the cases were male and 44.4% were female. The majority of Flight Attendants (82.2%) were White with 6.7% identifying as Black or African American, 6.7% were Hispanic or Latino, 2.2% were Asian, and 2.2% identified as Multi-Racial.

Measures

The survey, created by the researchers with feedback from the FADAP Advisory Board, was comprised of closed- and open-ended questions regarding flight attendants' past and current work history, work attendance, safety at work, and other work performance

questions before and after entering treatment the most recent time. Flight attendants were asked specifically about the last six flying months before entering their last treatment for AOD, and the most recent flying month since returning to work after their last treatment. Specific survey questions included: 1) How have attendance and other work performance factors differed before and after treatment? 2) Would you seek help through your employer if assistance were not available through the FADAP program or other means? 3) What perceived barriers exist for help-seeking through airline employers? 4) How satisfied were you with the FADAP services you received? The survey took about 15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data and paired samples t-tests were used to assess differences between responses from flight attendants regarding key outcomes pre-treatment as compared to post-treatment. Data included ordinal level variables measured through multiple choice rank order and whole number responses. To account for low power and minimize the effect of galloping alpha (Type II Error), the researchers used a more stringent alpha level of $\alpha < .01$ with the t-tests.

Study 2: Qualitative Phone Interviews with Flight Attendants

Phone interviews were conducted with 12 flight attendants who had used FADAP, were in recovery from AOD for at least six months, and had returned to flying in recovery from AOD. Interview questions were designed to further explore the impact of AOD on job performance, health, and commitment to the profession, and the impact of recovery on these factors.

Sample

A total of 12 flight attendants who volunteered to be interviewed qualified for the study (out of 18 who volunteered). Eleven were employed as flight attendants at the time of the interview (one was recently retired and one was on disability after having returned to work following treatment with FADAP).

Measures

The structured interview guide included 14 questions related to the flight attendants' participation in FADAP, directly asking flight attendants about their job performance, health and view of and commitment to their profession before and after recovery.

Data Analysis

Two researchers independently coded the data using qualitative methods of line-by-line coding.⁶ Major themes per question were identified by having at least four supporting comments.

Results

Study 1: Survey Results

Company and Personal Ratings of Work Record

In the most recent flying month since returning to work after their last treatment, flight attendants self-reported that their companies would give them significantly ($p < .01$) more positive ratings on several aspects of their work record, including attendance, on-duty performance, rapport with management, attention to safety duties, professionalism, compliance with company policy, compliance with FAA regulations and

overall work record. Flight attendants also rated all aspects of their work record significantly more positively following treatment. This includes attendance, on-duty performance, customer service, rapport with coworkers, rapport with management, attention to safety duties, professionalism, compliance with company policy, compliance with FAA regulations, and overall work record.

Impact of Substance Use on Work Performance and Safety and Injuries

In the most recent flying month since returning to work after their last treatment, flight attendants reported engaging in several activities significantly less frequently ($p < .01$), including not showing up for a trip, using a prescription pain medication while flying, bidding their flying schedule to have access to AOD, showing up for a flight hung-over, and drinking past the required cut-off time. Flight attendants also reported significantly fewer occurrences of engaging in negative safety-related behaviors including disregarding safety procedures, engaging in activities that could have resulted in on-the-job injury to them or others, and using emergency health services either on or off duty.

Program Satisfaction

The majority of flight attendants (87%, $n=40$) said they would be extremely or very likely to ask FADAP for recovery help, if needed. The majority (93.5%, $n=42$), would also be extremely or very likely to recommend FADAP's services to another flight attendant.

Help-Seeking Through Employer

More than half of flight attendants (54.3%, $n=25$) reported that they would not have sought help for their AOD problem if the only

assistance available was through their employer. Those flight attendants cited reasons including concerns about privacy and confidentiality, concerns about employer response and fear of retaliation, job threat concerns, and stigma and embarrassment.

Study 2: Phone Interview Results

This section presents results for the major theme within each research topic. Some questions have more than one primary theme identified. A full list of themes emerging from the data within each topic can be viewed in Table 1.

Topic 1: Impact of Substance Abuse on Work Performance

Flight attendants described a range of ways their AOD use affected their work before they got into treatment the most recent time. Seven major themes emerged including the primary theme *ability to perform job/safety duties/first responder role*. Within this theme, flight attendants talked about being unsafe to fly, having poor reaction times, sometimes not knowing how to do their jobs, and experiencing problems that impacted their first responder duties. See Table 1 for list of all major themes within the six topics covered in this paper.

Topic 2: Impact of Recovery on Work Performance

When flight attendants were asked how recovery affected their work performance, six major themes emerged (see Table 1), including the primary theme *engagement*. According to Gallup,⁷ "engaged employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company...they drive innovation and move the organization forward." Flight attendants talked about

changes in their engagement including taking on additional work, going the “extra mile”, increased pride, increased happiness, improved confidence, and fewer injuries.

Topic 3: Impact of Substance Abuse on Health

When asked how their use of AOD affected their health, two major themes emerged (see Table 1). The first, *impact on physical health* included feeling sick, fatigued and rundown. More severe physical health problems included neglecting health by not taking prescribed medication or engaging in risky sexual behaviors that further endangered their physical health. The second major theme, *impact on mental health* usually focused on mood; flight attendants reported being unhappy, depressed, anxious, irritable, and impatient.

Topic 4: Impact of Recovery on Health

Flight attendants were asked how recovery affected their health and three major themes emerged (see Table 1), including the primary theme of *improved health and health care*. Flight attendants discussed improvements in their physical health, due to no longer using AOD, but also greater interest in caring for their health, both physical and mental health. Some reported improvements such as feeling healthier, looking better, getting sick less often, developing a healthier lifestyle, and paying greater attention to their health. Others had more dramatic changes in their physical health where the ill-effects of substance use were reversed.

Topic 5: Impact of Substance Abuse on View of and Commitment to Flight Attendant Profession

When asked how AOD impacted their view of and commitment to their profession as flight

attendants, three major themes emerged (see Table 1), including the primary theme *engagement and passion*. Most flight attendants reported that passion was dampened, joy decreased, and they became disengaged from their jobs when using AOD. A few flight attendants reported that throughout their AOD use, they still loved their jobs, with one flight attendant reporting it drove his desire to recover.

Topic 6: Impact of Recovery on View of and Commitment to Flight Attendant Profession

When flight attendants were asked about how recovery impacted their view of and commitment to their profession, two major themes emerged (see Table 1), including the primary theme *improved engagement and commitment in recovery*. Improved engagement was expressed in several ways, including a return to passion and joy experienced on the job, pride in the job, and increased commitment to the profession.

Discussion

Flight attendants who used FADAP overwhelmingly reported improvements in their AOD use, attendance and dependability, work performance and safety, physical and mental health, coworker and customer relations, and engagement after completing treatment. A relatively long list of potential outcome topics emerged from the data that were used to revamp the FADAP data management system to be more workplace-outcomes focused. Specifically, flight attendants reported via the online survey and phone interviews that they observed noticeable improvement in the following areas before and after finishing their last treatment episode and entering their most recent recovery phase: absenteeism,

Table 1. Primary Themes within the Six Topic Areas

Topic Area	Primary Themes
Impact of AOD on Work Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to perform job/ safety duties/ first responder role • Poor relationships with coworkers • Attendance and dependability issues • Increased presenteeism • Poor customer relations • Embarrassing or unacceptable behavior • Lack of work engagement
Impact of Recovery on Work Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved work engagement • Improved overall work performance • Better customer service • Better attendance • Improved relationships with coworkers • Changed behavior on layovers
Impact of AOD on Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact on physical health • Negative impact on mental health
Impact of Recovery on Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved health and health care • Improved mental health • More active and/or more energy
Impact of AOD Abuse on View of and Commitment to the Profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative engagement and lack of passion • Substance use became more important than the job • Poor overall work performance
Impact of Recovery on View of and Commitment to the Profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved engagement and commitment to recovery • Recovery is more important than work

engagement, presenteeism, safety, and interpersonal relationships. These five areas were noted by the researchers and have now been integrated into the revised FADAP data management system. Using standardized measures or measures based on standardized measures and modified for specific use within the airline industry, results from this study formed the basis of where to start in the identification of workplace outcomes closely related to participation in FADAP and after returning to work from treatment.

While this study suffered from limitations including, but not limited to reliance on self-report data, low response rate to the online survey thereby preventing the researchers to generalize results to all flight attendants, this study represents a good starting place for researchers and practitioners to better understand some of the unique ways in which AOD use affects the workplace for flight attendants and others working in and relying on the airline industry. It also served as a basis for identifying potentially significant workplace outcomes that are now being tracked as flight attendants enter the FADAP process.

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