

*This Ensuring Solutions Issue Brief is the eighth in a series addressing the effects of alcohol on work and family.*

# Employer Commitment Can Help Overcome Obstacles to Effective Alcohol Treatment

Communities and employers, families and individuals forfeit critical opportunities when an employee or family member seeks help but cannot overcome the many barriers to alcohol treatment. Expanding access to treatment, however, can limit missed chances. For example, a unique partnership between Shell Oil and the health company ValueOptions addresses hurdles faced by problem drinkers.

Research indicates that in many workplace settings people with alcohol problems – that is, those who drink in ways that endanger health or safety – continue to face an assortment of barriers to treatment, including:

## STIGMA AND LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

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Employees often suffer because they are too embarrassed and afraid to discuss their alcohol problem. Some think they “should be strong enough to handle their drinking problem by themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

## JOB-RELATED FEARS

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More than one in five insured employees believe that if they seek coverage for treatment they will face negative consequences at work.<sup>2</sup> Some fear getting passed over for advancement or losing their jobs. Although laws often protect confidentiality, employees believe that once they access their benefits their employers will know about their alcohol problems.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, it is only by being in treatment that employees are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.<sup>4</sup>

## FINANCIAL HURDLES AND DAILY LIFE CHALLENGES

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Many people with alcohol problems worry that the cost of treatment will be beyond their reach.<sup>5</sup> Some must overcome obstacles such as finding transportation to treatment sites, arranging for time off from work and securing child care.<sup>6</sup>

## AT THE WORKPLACE, RELUCTANT EMPLOYERS

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Because alcohol is a legal, socially accepted substance, some employers are reluctant to address alcohol problems among their personnel. Unclear or punitive policies may discourage employees from seeking needed treatment. For information on workplace policies that encourage treatment, see the U.S. Department of Labor’s Drug-Free Workplace Advisor at <http://www.dol.gov/asp/programs/drugs/workingpartners/dfwpadvisor.asp>.

## SHORTCOMINGS IN HEALTH PLAN COVERAGE

Employers may not realize that how they set up their health insurance coverage can create barriers to accessing needed treatment because:

- without a clear understanding of the potential needs of their employees – and thinking that they will save money – employers secure health plans that do not provide the amount and type of treatment people with alcohol problems need<sup>7</sup> (see Ensuring Solutions Issue **Briefs 6** and **7** by visiting [www.ensuringsolutions.com](http://www.ensuringsolutions.com))
- managed care plans may deny coverage for treatment despite their promise of such benefits<sup>8</sup>
- health plans sometimes charge higher copayments for alcohol treatment services than for services to treat physical ailments, discouraging people from getting needed care (Ensuring Solutions Issue **Brief 1** at <http://www.ensuringsolutions.org/pages/reisbr.html#ib1> outlines seven tools employers can use to address alcohol problems.)

## SHELL OIL ACTS TO HELP OVERCOME BARRIERS

Shell Oil took a straightforward step to help its employees receive treatment. The company, which employs more than 22,000 people in the U.S., established a position in its health services division dedicated to advocating for people with alcohol and other substance use problems.

"We want to make the way as smooth as possible so that people can get the help they need," says Bud Peterson, Shell's Special Health Services case manager. Peterson helps employees overcome financial, insurance and other problems. He works to maximize the assistance available through their benefits and functions as a liaison with behavioral health care provider ValueOptions.

To minimize their job-related fears, ValueOptions mails to each Shell employee at the start of alcohol treatment a Shell manual that explains the company's policies, procedures and expectations, including those regarding confidentiality. ValueOptions personnel encourage employees undergoing treatment to contact Shell's Medical Services Division. If they do, Peterson steps into the picture, working closely with a ValueOptions case manager who understands Shell employees' needs.

The energy company's approach, says Ginny Sedberry of ValueOptions, is: "Let's help employees get well, stay well and continue to be successful in their employment."

- 1 Grant, B. F. 1997. Barriers to Alcoholism Treatment: Reasons for Not Seeking Treatment in a General Population Sample. *Journal of Alcohol Studies*. 4:365-71.
- 2 Hazelden Foundation. 2002. U.S. Employees Fear Job Loss if They Seek Drug, Alcohol Treatment. Press release issued October 25, 2002. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.jointogether.org/sa/news/alerts/reader/0,1854,554934,00.html>.
- 3 Steele, LH. 2002. The Treatment Gap. *EAP Digest*. Fall 2002.
- 4 U.S. Department of Justice, Americans with Disabilities Act Regulation for Title II. 1991. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/reg2.html>.
- 5 Grant. 1997.
- 6 Goplerud, Eric and Cimon, Marlene. 2002. *Workplace Solutions: Treating Alcohol Problems Through Employment-Based Health Insurance*. Washington, DC: Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, George Washington University Medical Center.
- 7 Stein, Bradley D. 2003. *Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services Among Privately Insured Individuals in Managed Behavioral Health Care*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rand.org/publications/RGSD/RGSD170/RGSD170.pdf>.
- 8 Goplerud and Cimon. 2002.

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*Working with policymakers, employers and concerned citizens, Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems at The George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, DC, provides research-based information and tools to help curb the avoidable health care and other costs associated with alcohol use. The project works to improve access to treatment for Americans who need it. It is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. For more information, please visit the Ensuring Solutions Website at [www.ensuringsolutions.org](http://www.ensuringsolutions.org).*

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