



# A Review of Workplace Substance Use Policies in Canada

Substance use affects employees and their families, co-workers, employers and the public in profound ways that span personal and professional boundaries. Employers are concerned with how they can effectively address substance use affecting the workplace. *A Review of Workplace Substance Use Policies in Canada* highlights the need for effective, comprehensive policies as a central approach to this challenge.

## Key Messages

The results of an environmental scan, national survey and key informant interviews show that among publicly available documents, few organizations have comprehensive substance use policies. Comprehensive substance use policies are important because:

- Substance use contributes to increased costs, absenteeism, turnover, disciplinary actions and use of resources while negatively affecting employees and their families, colleagues, organizations and the public.
- While 84% of employers surveyed were very concerned (58%) or somewhat concerned (26%) with how pending cannabis legalization will affect safety in the workplace, a well-implemented comprehensive substance use policy is one of the best available tools employers have to address all substances affecting the workplace.
- Substance use policies are the cornerstone for addressing and improving health and safety for employees and employers around substance use affecting the workplace.
- Comprehensive policies balance the disciplinary and supportive elements between employer and employee needs, effectively managing risk while reducing stigma.

Each of the comprehensive components, including objectives and scope, prevention, observation and investigation, support, return-to-work, non-compliance, review and evaluation, and meeting legal requirements, are necessary. They ensure that organizations are managing risk, abiding by human rights legislation, and supporting employee health and safety. These Canadian findings suggest that there are opportunities to address substance use more effectively in the workplace setting. There is an opportunity to support employees through policy measures including education, prevention, treatment, return-to-work and accommodation considerations.

## Why Does This Matter?

Substance use affecting the workplace is a growing concern among a variety of groups including employers, employees, industry associations, unions, health professionals and insurance companies. The negative consequences can be serious and wide-ranging. Substance use affects the workplace



by negatively influencing the health and safety of employees using substances, co-workers and, in certain settings, the public. Substance use affecting the workplace also contributes to increased costs, absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, disciplinary actions and use of organization resources, as well as lower productivity and lower workplace morale (Ames & Bennett, 2011; Frone, 2004; Pidd, Kostadinov, & Roche, 2015; Zwerling, Ryan, & Orav, 1990).

One of the most viable ways that substance use can be addressed in the workplace is through a developing and implementing a comprehensive policy in the workplace (International Labour Organization, 2012). The findings in this CCSA report are a needed first step in understanding workplace responses to addressing substance use, and features a snapshot of best practice policy elements to address substance use affecting the workplace. This research was undertaken to analyse and provide a general overview of the state of workplace policies on substance use in Canada, identify lessons learned and best practices, and ascertain which policy areas need more guidance, tools and resources.

## What Did We Do?

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) identified the need for research in this area as a first step towards understanding how Canadian employers address substance use in the workplace. CCSA examined the literature, then collected both quantitative and qualitative data through an environmental scan of substance use policies in various Canadian organizations, a national survey and key informant interviews of personnel from safety-sensitive industries. The industries included in the survey and key informant interviews included aviation, marine, rail, oil and gas, construction, law enforcement and transportation. Through the survey and interviews, CCSA gathered information about how organizations address substance use, concerns about cannabis legalization, types of testing, treatment, and return-to-work policies, and support options offered to employees, among other information.

## What Did We Find?

### Examination of the Literature

Through an examination of the literature, eight policy components and a large number of policy details were identified as important to the development of comprehensive policies. The eight components of comprehensive workplace substance use policies were as follows:

- Objectives and scope
- Prevention
- Observation and investigation
- Support
- Return-to-work/duty
- Non-compliance
- Review and evaluation
- Legal requirements



## Environmental Scan

- Among the publicly available data of approximately 800 organizations, a total of 35 policies, 12 policy statements (not full policies), and 24 position statements (not policies, but organization positions) were identified, reviewed and analyzed.
- Within the 35 substance use policies, 15 were comprehensive substance use policies (or full programs).
- The results suggest that a number of organizations have insufficient policies to address substance use affecting the workplace.

## National Survey and Key Informant Interviews (Safety-Sensitive Industries)

- Findings are based on data from 87 survey respondents and 12 key informant interviews.
- Fewer employers featured treatment, support and return-to-work programs, demonstrating that disciplinary measures were more representative than measures to support treatment, recovery and accommodation.
- Regarding cannabis, 84% of organizations reported being somewhat to very concerned about the potential impact of the legalization and regulation of this substance.
- An important best practice identified by key informants was to create a workplace culture that sets out expectations that impairment from substance use will not be tolerated and that encourages a trusting and supportive environment for those affected by substance use issues.
- Several key informants indicated that the biggest factor related to success in reducing substance use affecting the workplace was employee engagement in treatment and a commitment to recovery.
- Few survey respondents reported that their organization evaluated their policies and practices with the input of general employees (16%).
- 41% of survey respondents responded that their organizations do address accommodation of substance use disorders.

**Key Informant:** "... if you look at the pattern of SUD [substance use disorder], they used to be considered moral failings, almost pre-AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] ... We've evolved since then to say we're going to use a professional. That sort of evolution of treating SUD as legitimate medical disorders is important. [Our organization's] significant success [in this area] and our ability to weather regulatory changes including legalization of cannabis, are because we're not looking at this as a legal or moral issue, it's a medical issue."

## What Does this Study Mean for You?

The majority of Canadian adults are employed, and substance use continues to affect health and safety in the workplace. Comprehensive substance use policies that balance disciplinary and supportive elements help employers manage risk and support legislated human rights. Substance use policies that balance employer and employee needs benefit employees, employers and the public by setting clear guidelines and expectations that can help to establish a workplace culture



that reduces risks, costs and stigma. Policymakers can ensure that a balance of disciplinary and supportive policy elements are in place to address substance use in the Canadian workplace by setting clear standards for all employers.

## Where Can You Learn More?

You can access the [full report](#) on the CCSA website. CCSA also features various reports and resources of interest to employers including the [Life in Recovery](#) report, and [Cannabis](#) and [Impaired Driving](#) reports and resources.

## References

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