



UNITED WAY
Northwest Vermont

AN EMPLOYER GUIDE TO SUBSTANCE MISUSE

Created by United Way of Northwest Vermont in collaboration with
United Way's Working Bridges Program and Prevention Works!VT.



This Toolkit was adapted from the WorkLife Partnership Toolkit and
United Way of Northwest Vermont's Mental Health Toolkit.

AN EMPLOYER GUIDE TO SUBSTANCE MISUSE

This Toolkit was created by United Way of Northwest Vermont in collaboration with United Way's Working Bridges Program and Prevention Works!VT as part of a workgroup of partners representing employers and community organizations focused on substance misuse prevention and recovery. The Toolkit was adapted from the [WorkLife Partnership Toolkit](#) and [United Way of Northwest Vermont's Mental Health Toolkit](#).

This United Way of Northwest Vermont Workplace Toolkit has been designed to promote healthy and safe workplaces by addressing substance misuse through developing preventive policies and managing its impact. Organized into six sections—culture, laws, policy, prevention, intervention, and recovery—the toolkit emphasizes understanding substance misuse as part of a continuum that can lead to dependency, significantly affecting individuals and employers. The Toolkit supports continuous efforts in building a healthy and safe workplace culture. It offers structured guidance for any stage of the continuum of care and community support with additional resources provided.

CONTENTS

- Setting the Stage – Why Understanding Substance Misuse Matters5
 - What is Substance Misuse?5
 - Why Follow This Guidance?6
 - The Continuum of Care and Community Support.....7
- Cultivating a Healthful Workplace Culture9
 - Building a Supportive Workplace Culture9
 - Destigmatizing Substance Misuse.....10
 - Community Partners11
 - Workplace Culture Checklist & Resources.....12
- How Laws May Impact Your Organization.....13
 - Law vs Policy13
 - Understanding Industry and Business Legal Obligations.....13
 - The Americans with Disabilities Act.....15
 - Substance Misuse and the Law Checklist & Resources.....15
- Helpful Policies and Benefits.....16
 - Helpful Policies17
 - Employee Benefits to Consider18
 - Education.....20
 - Policy Checklist & Resources.....21
- How Does Prevention Work?.....22
 - What is Prevention?22
 - Drug-Free Workplaces.....23
 - Prevention Consultants.....23

Prevention Checklist & Resources.....	24
When and How to Intervene.....	25
How Substance Misuse Shows Up at Work.....	25
Cessation.....	26
Overdose Planning.....	27
Training.....	28
Intervention Checklist & Resources.....	28
Promoting Recovery.....	29
Recovery Programs.....	29
Recovery Ready Workplaces.....	30
Recovery Checklist & Resources.....	30
How to Support Staff & Managers.....	31
What You Can Do to Help Employees.....	31
Resources and References.....	33
Resources.....	33
References.....	35

SETTING THE STAGE - WHY UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE MISUSE MATTERS

This toolkit is meant for employers in Vermont to promote healthy and safe workplaces. It offers assistance in developing policies and practices to prevent substance misuse and address impacts of substance use. The toolkit is organized into six sections: culture, laws, policy, prevention, intervention, and recovery.

What is Substance Misuse?

Many terms are used to describe an individual's use of a substance. For some individuals, occasional use of substances does not lead to chronic or disordered usage. For others, the use of the substance becomes increasingly challenging to curb over time. This can result in a dependency on substances.



Substance use refers simply to the act of using a substance – it may be a glass of wine on a weekend evening. **Substance misuse** is when that use is inappropriate – for example, drinking a glass of wine while on the job. **Substance use disorder** (which has sometimes been [or is sometimes] referred to as abuse, dependence, or addiction) is a diagnosis of a treatable mental health disorder that presents as an individual's inability to regulate their use of substances. **Drug use** is sometimes used interchangeably with substance use. This term is used less frequently, but some government policies, such as a “drug-free” workplace, still use it. **Addiction** is a chronic medical condition related to the compulsive use of a substance despite its negative impacts.

This toolkit speaks primarily to **substance misuse**. This is because, as an employer, you can identify substance misuse as inappropriate or harmful, but you should avoid using diagnostic medical terms. Substance misuse is often viewed as part of a continuum of substance use that can lead to increasing hardships for an individual and an employer. Understanding the continuum of substance use, including substance use disorder, will help you make informed decisions about policy and culture in your workplace. It will also help make your workplace a better and safer place to work.

Why Follow This Guidance?

Over 20 million Americans who work full-time have a substance use disorder. Nearly as many Americans aged 18 and older have a substance use disorder and do not work. Untreated substance use disorders cost employers, insurers, and workers thousands of dollars per capita each year (Department of Labor, 2023).

By developing workplace substance misuse policies and practices, employers may help current employees find the care they need to stay healthy, safe, and employed. Employers may also engage with additional prospective employees, reduce the societal cost of substance misuse, and improve the overall well-being of Vermonters.

Addressing substance misuse in the workplace can also help save lives by reducing the likelihood of equipment and machinery being operated by an employee under the influence. Lives can also be saved by learning how to prevent workplace overdose deaths, which have risen every year since 2012 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)

This toolkit is designed to support organizations in developing a healthy workplace culture, effective policymaking, and employee support regarding the misuse of substances in work environments. It aims to promote inclusive, healthy, and safe working environments.

Are You Prepared... for the possibility of an emergency health situation in the workplace?

Your team could one day be responding to a traumatic event: a colleague may overdose and pass away while at work. A coworker could find the employee, leading to immediate distress and shock among staff. This colleague's sudden death may leave a profound impact on everyone, casting a shadow of grief and trauma over the workplace.

Events such as these can be disruptive, traumatic, and emotional. Will your organization be able to create time and space to care for its employees? Will you have access to resources such as counseling? How will you communicate with your staff to ensure their safety, health, and knowledge of available resources? How will you take care of yourself?

Take the time to build a plan now. Develop employee benefits and communication pathways and identify critical resources such as counseling or HR partners. Building a policy now will create a safer and more supportive environment in the future.

The Continuum of Care and Community Support

The six sections of this toolkit align with the concept of a continuum of care and community support. Substance misuse reduction requires constant and evolving efforts from employers. It includes building a healthy workplace culture, understanding laws, developing strong policy, maintaining an environment of prevention, understanding intervention, and supporting staff in treatment and recovery—all of which, in turn, lead to a healthy workplace culture and reinforced policy.

The Continuum:

Workplace Culture

Workplace culture can ensure employees are provided with a healthy and safe working environment that destigmatizes substance misuse and maintains inclusive policies. A healthy workplace culture reduces social barriers to treatment and care.

Laws

All organizations must understand the way federal, state, and local laws apply to them. Understanding and following the law is necessary to continue operations and employment.

Policy

Policy sets expectations for staff and provides employers with precedence for holding staff to those expectations. Strong policy is particularly important when navigating sensitive topics.



Prevention

Prevention reduces the onset, progression, or recurrence of substance misuse disorder. Prevention can take the form of activities, policies, or trainings.

Intervention

Intervention is when others take an active role in attempting to mitigate another's substance misuse. Intervention should be done with care, and only when it aligns with policy.

Treatment & Recovery

Treatment and recovery are the part of the continuum in which an individual receives care and enters a period in which they begin to improve their wellbeing. Treatment typically refers to the active process of changing thoughts and behaviors, and is often conducted by professionals in outpatient, inpatient, or residential settings. Recovery, on the other hand, is a process by which individuals reduce their dependence on a substance over time and regain autonomy in their lives. Recovery can be different for different people: in some instances, it means complete abstinence from substances; in others it is a reduction on the reliance of substances. Creating a safe recovery environment can have significant positive impacts on employees and companies. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration has published an 8-page [Working Definition of Recovery](#).

This toolkit may be referenced as a guide for any part of the continuum of care and community support. Organizations may find it helpful to identify the part of the continuum most relevant to the current need and start there. Additional resources and tools are listed at the end of this toolkit.

CULTIVATING A HEALTHFUL WORKPLACE CULTURE

Building a Supportive Workplace Culture

A healthy and safe work environment is one in which employees and employers feel supported and informed by their coworkers and the organization's policy. A supportive workplace culture destigmatizes substance misuse and practices inclusive hiring, recruiting, and retention while also cultivating a recovery-ready workplace through training and policy.



Recovery-ready workplaces are professional environments that implement policies to destigmatize recovery, educate employees, and facilitate access to services for those actively in recovery.

Recovery is the process of an individual improving their well-being and living a self-directed life. Recovery can look different depending on the person but can often include detoxification, counseling, and engaging in life without the use of substances.

A healthy and safe workplace must also be a place where employees are physically and mentally supported. In some instances, substance-free policies are legally required to protect employees' physical safety, such as businesses within the transportation industry.

When developing a policy that strictly prohibits the use of substances in a work environment, organizations should be careful to ensure the policy does not discriminate against those who may be in recovery or otherwise struggling with substance misuse. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission maintains a list of [general non-discriminatory policy tips](#) that can be used by employers while creating policy. Strong policies and supporting education are necessary to create a trusting, healthy work environment.

Destigmatizing Substance Misuse

An individual who is experiencing challenges with substance use is not inherently bad at their job, dangerous, or immoral. However, rhetoric and generalizations about substance use or misuse have historically resulted in considerable stigmatization of those in treatment or recovery. Reducing the stigma and disapproval that society and colleagues have towards substance misuse can result in increased well-being for every member of a community, as well as a stronger workforce.

To destigmatize substance misuse in your organization, make a formal effort to reduce biased language and develop written policies to ensure the inclusion of people in treatment and recovery. It is helpful to provide education and training to facilitate this – various training opportunities are included in the checklists after each section.

Employers play an important role in disrupting stigma. Organizational culture often starts at the top. Leadership should set a tone of using appropriate language and demonstrating trust for those in recovery. Substance use disorder treatment and recovery services do not need to be hidden – consider sharing resources during onboarding or on bulletin boards to help create a safer space.

“Words Matter,” The National Institute on Drug Abuse’s preferred language for talking about addiction. [Words Matter: Preferred Language for Talking About Addiction | National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)

Community Partners

Various nonprofit, governmental, and community partners are available to provide guidance or assistance to employers and their employees.

United Way's Working Bridges is an innovative program designed to improve job retention, stability, and advancement by supporting employees and students with community resources. Working Bridges partners with employers to help Vermonters reach stability and thrive while supporting human resource departments, reducing employee turnover, and increasing productivity.

Working Fields is a mission-driven staffing agency that works for associates and employers alike. It connects individuals in recovery from substance use addiction to employment and offers ongoing support in a unique peer coaching model.

Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) is the world's largest human resources consulting organization. They work with hundreds of thousands of members across over 165 countries. SHRM provides a variety of HR services, from training to technical assistance.

Turning Point Centers and other Recovery Centers are community-based non-profit recovery centers that provide safe, healthy, substance free environments. Turning Point Centers and other Recovery Centers also offer recovery support meetings, activities, coaching, and advocacy.

Workplace Culture Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> POLICY	Develop a written policy stating a commitment to an environment of inclusivity for those in recovery and consider mandatory training. <u>SAMHSA - Policy on the Inclusion of People with Lived Experience</u> <u>General Non-Discrimination Policy Tips U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<u>Vermont Department of Health - Ending the Stigma</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> CONNECTIONS	<u>Working Bridges - United Way of Northwest Vermont</u> <u>Society of Human Resource Management - The Voice of All Things Work</u> <u>Turning Point Centers & other Recovery Centers</u> <u>Working Fields</u>

HOW LAWS MAY IMPACT YOUR ORGANIZATION

It is important to understand whether you have a legal, business, or social obligation behind the policies and practices of a workplace – especially when it comes to policies about substance misuse. Drug testing, for example, may be a requirement of some organizations and prohibited in others.



Law vs Policy

Laws are external regulations established by governmental authorities. Understanding which laws apply to your business is an important early step in developing substance use/misuse policy.

Workplace **policies** are internal rules and guidelines developed by organizations to govern the behavior and operations of their employees.

When substance or drug-use laws do not apply to an organization, it is still advantageous to develop substance misuse policies to improve well-being, increase safety, destigmatize substance use, and set clear, enforceable expectations.

Understanding Industry and Business Legal Obligations

Some businesses and positions are required to be drug-free by law. Understanding how the law applies to your industry, business, or even a subset of your business is important. Most private employers are not required to have a drug-free workplace, but exceptions exist.

- [Federal Contractors and Grantees](#)
- [Safety and Security-sensitive Industries](#)

At the same time, Vermont law generally prohibits drug testing except in specific circumstances (for example, when it is required by federal law).

Contacting a legal group to understand best how the law applies to your organization is the best practice when possible.

Are You Prepared... for an employee to lose their ability to drive?

Commuting is often critical to an employee's ability to complete work assignments. Does your organization have a policy in place in the event that an employee loses their ability to drive? What adjustments and flexibility are you willing to provide for your staff? At what point do you have to consider discipline or even termination?

Is your organization able to support employees who lose their licenses? Employees may be able to use vacation leave for missed days or medical leave if they are enrolled in a treatment program. Can you help employees as they work through having their licenses reinstated?

Alternatively, your organization may be unable to support (or, in some cases, employ) employees who lose their licenses. If this is the case, do you have an HR protocol in place for discussions, discipline, or termination? It's essential to understand the laws and how they apply to your business.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

In some cases, being in recovery can have an impact on the protections that employees have under the Americans with Disabilities act (ADA). The ADA also gives the right to reasonable accommodation to those in recovery.

Recovery is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as “a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential”.

Substance Misuse and the Law Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> RESOURCES	SAMHSA - Federal Laws and Regulations U.S. Commission on Civil Rights - Substance Abuse under the ADA Vermont Laws - Drug Testing Vermont Legal Aid
---	--

HELPFUL POLICIES AND BENEFITS

Your organization's principles are only as strong as the policy that supports them. Policy should be determined by the business's goals, interests, and values, and all activities taken by staff and managers should be informed by policy.

Your company's prevention, intervention, and recovery policy should clearly and formally represent its position. This policy can set clear expectations, protect employees when followed, and protect organizations when not.

Does your organization have a written policy around substance misuse? Is it updated regularly? Do all your staff know about it and understand it? Be sure to have a way of formally documenting and sharing policy with staff, including when it is updated.

This section is divided into two sub-sections: helpful policies, which may be adopted and implemented by management; and employee benefits, which can be included as part of a compensation package.

Are You Prepared... to support employees with their emotional and mental health needs?

When an employee is supporting a loved one who is struggling with substance misuse, that employee may become withdrawn, anxious, and overwhelmed by tasks. They may fear being perceived as weak or be concerned about losing their job. They may hesitate to share their struggles but eventually open up to their manager after missing a crucial deadline.

It's not unusual for employees to struggle with productivity and focus due to a family member's substance misuse. Does your organization have a plan or resources to support the mental health of its employees? Do you provide benefits and tools to promote the safety of both your employee and their family member?

Your organization can better prepare by investing in employee assistance programs and mental health coverage benefits. Your policies should also be very clear about the roles and responsibilities of co-workers. Additionally, it is helpful to maintain a list of helpful services, such as [Vermont 211](#) and [Vermont Helplink](#). Further mental health guidance can be found in this toolkit's companion document, the [Mental Health Toolkit for Employers](#).

Helpful Policies

Inclusive Hiring, Recruiting, and Retention

There are many ways to build an inclusive environment. The US Department of Labor highlights two main approaches to hiring people in recovery: **Individual Placement Support (IPS) and second-chance protocols**. The IPS model pairs those in early recovery with specialists to support the employee and employer as they develop their relationship; second-chance hiring policies focus on developing a workplace and workforce that supports recovering individuals, often in the form of a recovery-ready workplace (see Recovery).

Having a clearly written inclusivity policy that includes employees recovering from substance misuse is an important first step to reducing stigma and promoting an inclusive environment. Ensuring your employee benefits include services for those in recovery and building a recovery-ready workplace will further strengthen your work environment.

Bonded Employees

If your organization has concerns about liability exposure when hiring someone in recovery, those concerns may be mitigated by “bonding” an employee during the hiring process. If a background check raises liability concerns, an insurance company can provide a fidelity bond to protect the organization and customers while still providing a job for the employee. You can learn more at [the US Department of Labor website](#).

Employee Benefits to Consider

The employee benefits market is expanding and doing much more than in the past to meet the needs of workers. These new benefits reflect a greater understanding of the importance of an employee's physical, mental, emotional, and financial wellness and how they are interconnected and show up at work. Here are a few options to consider that can expand your support for employee wellness.

Health Insurance, Family and Medical Leave

Many full-time employers already offer health insurance and paid time off programs. Still, some plans may be better designed to support individuals in recovery by ensuring they can cover some of the services they may need, such as prescription medications or counseling services. Similarly, consider extending sick leave to include family illness and substance-related complications. Because substance use disorder is considered a disability, be sure that it is technically treated as such in all benefits. Keeping all employees safe will help ensure a more vibrant workforce.

If you cannot offer your employees health insurance, consider directing them [to Vermont Health Connect](#), the State's health insurance marketplace.

Direct Mental Health Coverage

Substance use disorder is considered a mental health disorder. The most direct option to consider is covering the cost of mental health treatment for your employees. Investing in mental health treatment is cost-effective.

Disability Insurance

Disability coverage is not something most employees plan to use, but it's comforting to know it's there. Employees may need mental illness and substance use recovery coverage as a part of their disability plans. Recently, benefit companies have heard this feedback, and many are offering new plans that treat these illnesses like any other claim, with no

reduction in benefits, lifetime maximum, or separate benefit period. If you offer your employees disability coverage, find out from your provider how they treat disability due to mental illness, and let employees know what their coverage includes.

Hospital Indemnity Insurance

One of the biggest challenges people face regarding health care is fear of the unknown cost. Hospital indemnity insurance gives employees the choice and control they need to avoid gaps in medical coverage and help cover deductibles. This can reduce worries and fears about coverage, contributing to workplace stress and mental anxiety. Stress over medical bills often prevent people from seeking treatment early when a condition is most treatable and affordable.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Employee assistance programs play an important role in supporting employee health, safety, and job engagement, typically by offering personalized counseling, mental health, and substance misuse services.

By offering an EAP, employers can proactively address issues that can lead to workplace conflicts, health problems, and low morale. EAPs also provide confidential substance misuse screening, education, referrals to treatment, and support during treatment. By pairing EAPs with other health benefits, employers can help reduce substance use and health risks.

Flexible Schedules

Flexible schedules allow individuals who are working to manage their usage or are actively in recovery to attend counseling, medical, and other wellness-related appointments without reducing their income or paid leave. Consider offering a flexible schedule for individuals with substance use reduction-related appointments.

A flexible schedule permits employees to adjust their start and end times by an hour or to work seven hours on Tuesdays and nine hours on Wednesdays, enabling them to attend medical or recovery-related appointments.

Workplace Wellness Program

Implementing a holistic wellness program is an optimal strategy for building a culture of health and improving all dimensions of employees' well-being. This program may include initiatives that help employees manage emotional, financial, and occupational stress while improving physical and mental health outcomes through nutrition and exercise. This can indirectly help those dealing with substance misuse by reducing stress levels and encouraging healthier coping mechanisms.

Job Accommodations

Job accommodations are adjustment to tasks or working environments that improve an employee's ability to perform. Accommodations can vary depending on the disability being accommodated, but can take the form of adjusted schedules, providing assistive technologies, or making physical adjustments to the workplace. In some cases, employees have a right to reasonable accommodation. More information about accommodations can be found at the [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#) website.

Onsight Recovery Coaching

Recovery coaching provides support for individuals who are struggling with substance use disorder or are in recovery. Coaches can assist individuals in developing and sticking to plans, help integrate them into healthy and safe communities and reduce the chance of relapse. Bringing this service directly to the workplace can reduce transportation and scheduling barriers to support. If you are interested in more information on recovery coaching, **contact your local [Recovery Center](#) or [VAMHAR](#).**

Education

It's a good practice to make education a requirement through policy. Employers can build awareness and foster safe behaviors by educating employees about the health risks and productivity hazards of alcohol and drug misuse. Education is an ongoing process that includes participation from all employees. Educational opportunities should guide those personally battling substance misuse and others who want to support family members or peers dealing with addiction. Additionally, providing information on available resources and employer-sponsored benefits can encourage employees to seek help for themselves and others.

Educational resources **have been included in the checklists of some of the sections of this toolkit.**

Policy Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> INCLUSIVE POLICY	Update all inclusivity policies and DEI to include language supporting and protecting those in recovery. <u>U.S. Department of Labor - Recruitment and Employment of People in Recovery</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION POLICY	Develop policies that include regular mandatory training for employees and managers.
<input type="checkbox"/> DEVELOP BENEFITS	<u>US Chamber of Commerce - How to Create an Employee Assistance Program</u> <u>Vermont Department of Health - Worksite Wellness</u> <u>Vermont Health Connect - Insurance Information for Businesses and Employees</u> <u>Job Accommodation Network - Information for Employers</u>

HOW DOES PREVENTION WORK?

Substance misuse prevention typically takes the form of a series of activities, policies, and training designed to prevent, mitigate, or eliminate substance misuse.

What is Prevention?

Substance misuse prevention works to delay the onset of and reduce the harm of substance use across the lifespan. Through partnerships, community engagement, education, policy, and proven best practices, prevention works to reduce harmful community factors contributing to substance misuse and support strategies that increase individual and community well-being. The work results in reduced risk and increased resilience related to substance use for individuals and communities.

Prevention efforts may focus on the individual or their surroundings. To prevent substance misuse among employees in a work environment, it is important to establish a culture of health within the workplace. This establishes a foundational support system and provides them with firsthand access to the many benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle.

What could prevention look like in a workplace? [*A culture of health encourages healthy behaviors by aligning company policies, practices, and norms to support employee well-being.*](#) This can increase productivity, boost energy levels and morale, and empower individuals to take control of their health outcomes. Healthy habits can be normalized in various ways, including substance-free workplace events and celebrations.

In addition to supporting substance-free workplace policies and activities, businesses can support family education and activities that model and support parent and youth education on substance misuse. There are community resources such as prevention [coalitions and other organizations](#) that are willing partners offering caregiver education, youth groups,

and substance misuse prevention information that can be shared with your employees in newsletters and other communications. The [Vermont Department of Health](#) provides several family-centric substance use programs.

Drug-Free Workplaces

Drug-free workplaces are organizations that implement policies designed to reduce illicit drug use. As mentioned in the *Laws* section of this toolkit, many organizations may be legally required to maintain a drug-free workplace policy. *A brief note on terms: substance-free workplace is broader and more inclusive, but drug-free workplace is the federal language.*

Some policies extend beyond the place of employment and prohibit illicit drug usage in any setting. Drug-free workplaces may include required drug testing for some or all positions – other workplaces may be prohibited from testing. Understanding your organization’s legal obligations before implementing the policy is important. Consider reaching out to a Prevention Consultant at the Vermont Department of Health (see below) or contacting an attorney for guidance.

Prevention Consultants

The Vermont Department of Health employs 12 regional Prevention Consultants. Prevention Consultants work with organizations and communities to mitigate substance misuse in the state by providing education and policy recommendations. A list of Prevention Consultants can be found at healthvermont.gov.

Prevention Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> PREVENTION POLICY	Develop a drug-free workplace policy. SAMHSA - Develop a Policy
<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PARTNERS	Vermont Department of Health - Prevention Consultant Map Prevention Works! - Coalition Contact List
<input type="checkbox"/> RESOURCES	SAMHSA - Prevention of Substance Use Disorders Vermont Department of Health - Family Programs

WHEN AND HOW TO INTERVENE

All workplace interventions should be determined by workplace policy. Discussions about any individual's potential substance use can be considerably challenging, emotionally distressing, or even have legal consequences. It is important to develop a clear policy around intervention, educate staff about that policy, and stick to that policy. Maintaining and adhering to policy supports and protects employees.

Your organization's policy should be very clear about reporting requirements. It should include clear guidelines for expectations, communication structure, boundaries, and employee privacy.

Substance misuse in the workplace can be framed and addressed in various ways. Each situation will differ, so the appropriate approach will change based on the context.

Discussions should only be carried out by the individuals identified in company policy (for example, a manager or Human Resources), and those people should be trained for such conversations.

Managers will need to feel supported. They are often tasked with having nuanced and challenging conversations with employees. There will be times when someone's sound judgment does not lead to desired outcomes, which can result in distress. Consider how to build a culture that empowers managers to make hard decisions while respecting the challenges of the subject matter.

How Substance Misuse Shows Up at Work

The use or misuse of alcohol and other substances adversely affects employers, employees, and their families.

Are You Prepared... to react to an employee misusing substances at work?

An employee may start showing signs of substance misuse at work. Colleagues may notice changes in appearance and demeanor, leading to concern. The situation could escalate if the employee appears to be impaired or is found unconscious.

Do you have a plan to handle such events? Do your employees know what to do if they find themselves having to respond to a colleague that is misusing substances at work? Such situations can be dangerous, emotionally challenging, and legally fraught. It is important to consult with legal and human resource experts to develop a plan and communicate that plan to employees.

Develop a plan before you need it. It can keep your staff and business safe. For example, consider consulting an organization like Vermont Hemp and Cannabis Safety Consultants to develop policies and procedures around these sensitive topics.

Cessation

There are ways to create an environment that encourages and enables people to seek help on their own without needing the employer's active intervention.

Substance use disorders are chronic conditions, much like diabetes or hypertension, and should be treated with the same level of care. By offering cessation programs that provide individualized guidance, employees can feel that their health and medical needs are being taken seriously. This can be part of a workplace wellness program, through EAP, or offered as a stand-alone cessation program such as a support group meeting or counseling program.

Cessation programs may also offer group support sessions, active online communities, and access to medications that can help manage withdrawal symptoms. Investing in these

programs demonstrates an employer's commitment to employees' health, reduces stigma and fear of judgment or retribution, and creates a workplace culture of understanding and compassion.

Organizational managers and leaders can set a good example by normalizing resource use and destigmatizing treatment and recovery. Removing the negative connotation around cessation will make it more approachable to employees who may benefit from it.

Overdose Planning

The opioid epidemic continues to claim countless lives, including those in the workplace. With over 107,600 US deaths due to opioid overdoses in 2021 (CDC, 2022), it's clear that urgent action is needed to combat this devastating issue. Employers have the unique opportunity to prevent fatalities should an overdose occur in the workplace.

Naloxone is a proven way to save the life of someone from an opioid overdose, and now, with Narcan—the over-the-counter nasal spray version of Naloxone—it's easier than ever to have this tool on hand. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported nearly 400 opioid overdose deaths at work in 2020, highlighting the important role employers have in tackling this epidemic. It's important to act fast in the event of an overdose, as EMS response times can be delayed. This is why the CDC recommends having Naloxone as part of their safety kits, establishing Naloxone protocols, and preparing an action plan for responding to an opioid overdose.

The Vermont Department of Health maintains a website for opioid overdoses: [Know Opioid Overdose | Vermont Department of Health \(healthvermont.gov\)](https://healthvermont.gov/overdose).

Training

One way to prevent overdose death is to offer training to recognize and respond to overdoses. Many organizations offer such training, such as the University of Vermont's Community First Responder program or SAMHSA's Crisis Intervention video training. Helpful information and training from the [Vermont Department of Health](#) and other organizations can be found in the *intervention checklist* below.

Intervention Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> POLICY	Develop and circulate clear expectations for communication between employees, management, and HR.
<input type="checkbox"/> TRAINING	Mental Health First Aid SAMHSA - Crisis Intervention Services Vermont Department of Health - Opioid Overdose Response How to Use an Emergency Treatment That Can Save Someone's Life (youtube.com) The University of Vermont Extension - Community First Responder
<input type="checkbox"/> RESOURCES	SAMHSA - Plan and Implement a Program Vermont Helplink - Alcohol & Drug Support Center
<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PARTNERS	The University of Vermont Extension - Request Narcan Vermont Hemp and Cannabis Safety Consultants

PROMOTING RECOVERY

Recovery is defined in several different ways. In some instances, it is defined as complete abstinence from substances; in others, it refers to the removal of an individual's reliance on a substance. **Recovery is a process. Over time, people in recovery work to improve their well-being and regain control of their lives.** Workplaces can partner with Recovery Programs or become Recovery-Ready Workplaces to support and employ individuals in recovery.

Recovery Programs

Because substance use disorder is now viewed as a chronic disease, employers need to understand the different forms recovery can take and treat employees engaged in these programs as if they were in recovery from any other disease. The National Institutes of Health identifies three main types of recovery programming.

1. *Recovery-oriented systems of care* are chronic care management programs involving outpatient care, housing, coaching, and health checkups. These programs can be long-term and time-consuming.
2. *Recovery support services* are community-centric services that offer support to individuals as they work to improve their lives. Coaching and housing programs may also be used in these programs, but community centers, checkups, and support groups are more typical.
3. *Social and recreational recovery programs* are social structures and groups that encourage substance-free activities. These may look like fitness classes, social groups, and sports leagues.

Recovery Ready Workplaces

A recovery-ready workplace (RRW) is a professional environment that adopts policies that destigmatize recovery, educate employees, and facilitate access to services that may be needed by those actively in recovery.

RRW policies work to reduce misunderstandings by educating employees about substance use disorder and reframing the concept as a treatable condition for which recovery is possible. Benefits from a recovery-ready workplace include “an expanded labor force, increased worker well-being, decreased turnover, improved productivity, and reduced health care costs” (Department of Labor, 2023).

Recovery Checklist & Resources

<input type="checkbox"/> POLICY	U.S. Department of Labor - Workplace Readiness Toolkit
<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY	VAMHAR.
<input type="checkbox"/> RESOURCES	National Institute on Drug Abuse - Recovery Recovery Research Institute - Recovery 101

HOW TO SUPPORT STAFF & MANAGERS

If a manager or other staff person connects with an employee about substance misuse, there are some steps they can take to be supportive without overstepping.

What You Can Do to Help Employees

Validate their feelings. They may feel guilt or shame that they're struggling, and it can mean a lot to hear a boss say it sounds hard. Everyone needs help sometimes.

Connect them to a resource Share available resources by having some key community resources for the issues common in your workforce lets

Brainstorm a self-care plan. Explore what self-care can look like for them to cope with stress or burnout. It is important to consider hobbies, interests, and socialization.

Review their personal support system Many people withdraw from loved ones and fear being a burden. Encourage them to reach out to friends or family they trust.

Check-in and encourage

Following up to ensure your employees get support helps builds trust. Tell them you don't need details but ask if they got what they needed. If you see an improvement in their work, let them know and encourage them. It takes courage to reach out for care, and it can mean a lot to have that effort appreciated.

Reduce the stigma

Enacting policy and using language that reduces the stigma around substance misuse will create a safer and healthier environment for employees and managers to support one another and make healthy decisions.

Respect their privacy

Be clear with staff that there is no requirement to give you personal details. Keep the conversation open-ended so they share as much as they're comfortable with. Let them know that you understand they may not want to talk to their manager, but it might help to have someone else to talk to.

Build trust

To build trust, it's also helpful to build a personal connection. Share why you recommend the resource or talk about a specific experience where the resource helped you or another staff member. If you know the person they'll be connecting with, share their name and your experience with them.

Listen without judgement

Look for ways to learn what your employees want for substance use resources and support. Where do your employees get help, now or in the past? What are resources in the community that employees rely on, value, or have trusted relationships with?

Mental Health First Aid offers [five tips for nonjudgmental listening](#). This includes reflecting on your own perspective, maintaining positive body language, and recognizing cultural differences. It is a helpful resource for improving your ability to listen to others.

Lead By Example

In the same way that employees may hesitate to ask for time off if they never see their boss take a break, people will resist asking for help if their company's leaders never show their own vulnerabilities. Be intentional about repeating the message that everyone deals with issues outside of work, and at some point, everyone needs understanding and support. If you're comfortable, talk about your own experiences of a time when you struggled with something personal that followed you to work and how you got help.

Understanding and destigmatizing substance use can have a substantial positive impact on the safety and wellbeing of employees and their employers. Taking the time to improve company culture will make your organization more resilient. The most actionable way to begin building that culture is by using the resources provided in this toolkit to build informed and comprehensive policies.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Resources

Chittenden County Opioid Alliance – Employer Toolkit

https://www.uvm.edu/aqlabor/dashboard/sites/default/files/uploads/CCOA_EMPLOYER_TOOLKIT.pdf

Health Vermont – Prevention Consultant Regions & Contact Information

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/DSUPreventionConsultantMap.pdf>

How to Get Help – Vermont Department of Health

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs/how-get-help/find-recovery>

National Council for Mental Wellbeing – Five Tips for Nonjudgmental Listening

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/08/five-tips-for-nonjudgmental-listening/>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) – Information for Employers

<https://askjan.org/info-by-role.cfm#for-employers>

Prevention Works! – Vermont Prevention Coalition Contact List

<https://preventionworksvermont.org/coalition-contact-list/>

Society of Human Resource Management

<https://www.shrm.org/home>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Federal Contractors and Grantees

<https://www.samhsa.gov/workplace/employer-resources/contractor-grantee-laws>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Plan and Implement a [Drug-free Workplace] Program

<https://www.samhsa.gov/workplace/employer-resources/plan-implement-program#evidence>

United Way of Northwest Vermont – Mental Health Initiative

[Mental Health Initiative - United Way of Northwest Vermont \(unitedwaynwvt.org\)](https://www.unitedwaynwvt.org)

United Way of Northwest Vermont – Northwest and Central Vermont Prevention Network
<https://unitedwaynwvt.org/community-impact/special-initiatives/prevention-network/>

Turning Point Centers & other Recovery Centers- Recovery Non-profits
<https://vtrecoverynetwork.org/recovery-organizations/>

U.S. Chamber of Commerce – How to Create an Employee Assistance Program
<https://www.uschamber.com/co/run/human-resources/how-to-create-employee-assistance-program>

U.S. Department of Labor – Recovery-ready Workplace Toolkit
<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/RRW-hub/Toolkit>

U.S. Department of Labor – Recruitment and Employment of People in Recovery
<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/RRW-hub/Getting-started/Recruitment-employment>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – [General Non-Discrimination Policy Tips](https://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/guidelines.html) | [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(eoc.gov\)](https://www.eeoc.gov/)

Vermont 211 – Community Health and Human Resources
[Vermont 211 - United Way – VT 211](https://www.vt211.org/)

Vermont Department of Health – End Addiction Stigma
<https://www.healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs/end-addiction-stigma>

Vermont Department of Health – Opioid Overdose Response
[Opioid Overdose Response | Vermont Department of Health \(healthvermont.gov\)](https://www.healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs/opioid-overdose-response)

Vermont HelpLink – Recovery Services
<https://www.vthelplink.org>

Worklife Partnership – The Complete Guide to Supporting Employee Mental Health
[WorkLife-Partnership-The-Complete-Guide-to-Supporting-Employee-Mental-Health-1.pdf](https://www.worklifepartnership.org/worklife-partnership-the-complete-guide-to-supporting-employee-mental-health-1.pdf)
([worklifepartnership.org](https://www.worklifepartnership.org))

References

National Center for Health Statistics – U.S. Overdose Deaths in 2021 Increased Half as Much as in 2020 – But Are Still Up 15%

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/202205.htm#:~:text=For%20Immediate%20Release%3A%20May%2011%2C%202022&text=Provisional%20data%20from%20CDC's%20National,93%2C655%20deaths%20estimated%20in%202020

National Institute on Drug Abuse – Recovery

<https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/recovery>

National Institute on Drug Abuse – Words Matter: Preferred Language for Talking About Addiction

<https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/addiction-science/words-matter-preferred-language-talking-about-addiction>

National Institute of Mental Health – Mental Illness

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>

National Safety Council – Mental Health Cost Calculator

<https://www.nsc.org/getmedia/9d4aac59-5d29-495e-a661-f1b53752318a/emhc-key-takeaways.pdf>

Recovery Research Institute – What is Recovery?

<https://www.recoveryanswers.org/recovery-101/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Highlights for the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/2021-10/2020_NSDUH_Highlights.pdf

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Employer Resources

<https://www.samhsa.gov/workplace/employer-resources#the-toolkit>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Division of Workplace Programs (DPW)

<https://www.samhsa.gov/workplace/about/background>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Prevention of Substance Use and Mental Disorders

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/prevention>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Working Definition of Recovery

<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep12-recdef.pdf>

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights – Substance Abuse under the ADA

<https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/ada/ch4.htm>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics – Unintentional Overdoses Rose for the Ninth Consecutive Year in 2021

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2023/unintentional-overdoses-rose-for-the-ninth-consecutive-year-in-2021.htm>

Vermont Hemp and Cannabis Safety Consultants – Workplace Safety and Training

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit has been developed as a companion to the United Way of Northwest Vermont's [Employer Guide to Supporting Employee Mental Health](#). Components have been adapted from that toolkit.

This Toolkit was created by United Way of Northwest Vermont in collaboration with United Way's Working Bridges Program and Prevention Works!VT as part of a workgroup of partners representing employers and community organizations focused on substance misuse prevention and recovery.

The workgroup was led by:

Bryan O'Connor – Good Spirits LLC, *workgroup facilitator*

Adrienne Lueders-Dumont – United Way of Northwest VT, Northwest and Central Vermont Prevention Network, *workgroup coordinator*

Connie Beal – United Way of Northwest VT, Working Bridges Program, *workgroup co-lead*

Beth Shrader – Prevention Works!VT, *workgroup co-lead*

Workgroup members:

Tammy Bushell – Edlund Corporation

Tawyna Kristen – Green Mountain United Way

Jody Lantman – Rhino Foods

Lisa Lord – VAMHAR

Evelyn Sikorski – University of Vermont Medical Center Employee Assistance Program

Hilary Denton, Mary Pickener, Nicholas Tatakis, and Sean Campbell from the Vermont Department of Health and **Reid Wobby**, a drug and alcohol consultant who works closely with the Department of Health, provided additional content and guidance.

*Toolkit design by **Brian DeLaBruere**, United Way of Northwest VT, Marketing & Communications.*

The development of the Toolkit was funded by United Way's Prevention Lead Organization grant from the Vermont Department of Health's Division of Substance Use Programs.