



*A KCA Construction Industry Article of Interest:*

## **Construction Associations Shine a Light on the Opioid Crisis**

*By Bob McCall*

**NOTE:** This article first appeared in BreakingGround, a magazine published for the Master Builders' Association. For more information on this publication please visit [BreakingGround](#).

Drug addiction is attacking the very fabric of America. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their lives to drug abuse. In fact, the National Safety Council (NSC) tells us that 63,612 of our neighbors died from a drug overdose in 2016 alone. Of those deaths, more than 42,000 were attributed to opioids. In total, 351,602 Americans have died from an opioid related overdose between 1999 and 2016. In comparison, 291,000 of our soldiers died in battle during World War II. Faced with these staggering statistics, the construction industry in Pennsylvania has said enough is enough.

The Master Builders' Association of W.PA, the Keystone Contractors Association, NUCA PA, the Pennsylvania Building & Construction Trades Council, Keystone Mountain Lakes Regional Council of Carpenters, Sheet Metal Contractors & Air Conditioning Contractors National Association - PA Chapter, Pennsylvania Builders Exchange, Architectural Glass & Metal Association, Ironworker Employers Association of Western Pennsylvania, the General Building Contractors Association and others have joined together to support Construction Opioids Awareness Week in Pennsylvania July 22<sup>nd</sup> through July 28<sup>th</sup>.

A 2017 study showed that construction industry workers are second only to the food service industry in being most susceptible for opioid abuse. It really isn't hard to figure out why either. We all know that the work we do in the construction industry is physical demanding. CPWR –

The Center for Construction Research and Training estimates a bricklayer lifts 3.8 tons in a typical day. That's the equivalent of two small SUV's a day, seven Ford F-150s a week, and two Airbus A380s a year! That's demanding work for anyone, but it is a real recipe for disaster for the steadily aging workforce in our industry. The average age of a construction worker in Pennsylvania is between 43 and 44. Our bodies simply don't recover in our 40s and 50s like they did in our younger days. To avoid taking time off to recuperate, many workers turn to highly addictive prescription painkillers such as Percocet, Vicodin, or OxyContin to mask the symptoms. All too often, that is the trigger for an opioid addiction. When access to those prescription medications ends, the addiction does not. That is when the much cheaper and readily available opioids such as heroin and fentanyl can take over a person's life.

## **Start the Conversation**

Our industry does not like to talk about our problem with opioids. If we are going to win this war, we need to talk openly about the opioid problems we face.

“Businesses that do not address the prescription drug crisis are like ostriches sticking their head in the sand,” said Deborah A.P. Hersman, president and CEO of the National Safety Council. “The problem exists and doing nothing will harm your employees and your business.”

The National Safety Council, alongside the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago and addiction advocate Shatterproof, created a tool to show how the substance use disorder crisis can affect your workplace. The Substance Use Cost Calculator is a quick and easy way to track the potential cost of substance use disorders. Employers input basic statistics about their workforce, such as industry, location, and number of employees. The tool then calculates the estimated prevalence of substance use disorders among employees and dependents. Once you have all that information on hand, you can figure out a way to prioritize helping those who are struggling with a substance use disorder. It is estimated that 1 in 10 of us know someone that has died of an overdose. Your employees will appreciate a conversation on opioid abuse.

## **Participate in Your Substance Abuse Testing Program**

The Western Pennsylvania Construction Industry Drug Free Partnership was launched by the Master Builders' Association and their union partners in 2000. Building on programs created by the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA), the Ironworkers Employers Association (IWEA) and their unions, the program has now been providing certified drug free workers for close to 20 years. But it wasn't until 2013 that the program began testing participants for illegal use of opioids. By 2015, opioids had risen to the second most frequently detected drug, behind marijuana. But since then, thanks in large part to the educational efforts of the local construction industry and others, the rate of opioid detection has been cut nearly in half.

“When our people go to work, they know they need to show up drug free. It has become a way of life, part of their tools if you will,” said David Daquelente, executive director of the Ironworkers Employer Association.

Drug testing works. Nationally, it is estimated over 15 percent of workers in the construction industry have a substance abuse problem. But here in our region, we have a positive testing rate of just two percent. That is thanks to an aggressive and compassionate approach to substance abuse. Since its inception, the program has always taken the approach that instead of firing workers testing positive we will lead them through counseling and rehabilitation. The program isn't designed to punish those with problems. Instead it tries to lend a hand to those in need.

## Get the Resources

The National Safety Council has made available to everyone, members and non-members, educational materials and highly effective products. Their report, *Prescription Nation 2018 – Facing America's Opioid Crisis*, contains a wealth of information on the crisis. Additionally, they have created opioid warning labels to place on health insurance cards, prescription disposal bags, toolbox talks, fact sheets, posters, and much more. These are available free of charge at <http://safety.nsc.org/rxemployerkit>

You can do your part by being a participant in Construction Opioids Awareness Week. It is a unique opportunity for the entire industry to join the fight against this killer. The participating associations listed above will be providing more information in the days leading up to event. They are committed to fighting the battle against opioids in construction. But it is going to take the entire industry to win the war.

"Stopping the opioid epidemic in construction is going to take a multi-faceted, cooperative approach from stakeholders in both labor and management," says Lisa M. Sabitoni, executive director of the Laborers' Health & Safety Fund of North America. "There are numerous barriers to overcome, from stopping workers' pain from occurring in the first place to reducing the stigma of getting help and increasing affordable access to treatment. The solutions to help construction workers struggling with opioid dependence and addiction may be complex, but we must continue to work towards them for the benefit of workers and the industry as a whole."

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