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The opioid epidemic and the construction industry - by Karl Hudson

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You can't listen to tv or radio for very long without hearing more bad news about the opioid epidemic that's engulfing our country. Unfortunately, no industry is being hit harder by the crisis than construction.

Recently Associated General Contractors of Massachusetts, in collaboration with ABC and the other industry trade groups, presented a seminar on this issue that highlighted some sobering statistics – over 72,000 people in the United States died of drug overdoses in 2017 – more than 2,000 of them in Massachusetts. And while the overall number of deaths was down slightly from 2016 in our state, the numbers continued to rise among Hispanics and African Americans. For every death, there are 130 people with a substance abuse problem.

In terms of economic impact, the state economy lost nearly \$6 billion in 2017 from the opioid epidemic and people being unable to work. The national economic impact is estimated to be over \$500 billion, or nearly 3% of GDP.

Princeton economist Alan Kruger suggests that the epidemic accounts for a 20% decline in labor force participation among men. For those still in the workforce, individuals misusing pain relievers take 18 more days off annually than those who don't misuse prescription medications.

Construction has by far the highest percentage of opioid-related deaths of any industry. With so much work and overtime available in the current economy, people have the opportunity to earn a lot of money. That's tempting for employees who shouldn't overdue it due to injury. Addressing the resulting pain can lead to addiction.

This is everyone's concern. It isn't union vs. open shop issue or general contractor vs. subcontractor.

A consistent message at the seminar was that everyone has to take a first step in addressing the crisis. For some, that step was attending.

Constant communication is critical to address the huge lack of knowledge around the issue. Few of those suffering from addiction know what resources are available to them. Even a survey of employees at Boston Medical Center found that 83% didn't know what substance abuse treatments were covered by their insurance.

Several speakers talked of the important role supervisors can play. Employees need someone they can talk to who s/he can trust and who will not be judgmental.

If we can end the stigma around opioid addiction, more victims will seek treatment. In addition to listening without judgment, there are a number of things we as employers can do:

- Learn about addiction
- Politely correct misconceptions
- Seek out resources and share them with employees
- Offer compassionate support
- Share your own stories of stigma

Countless things go into running a successful business. In today's construction industry, helping employees who struggle with addiction is clearly one of them.

ABC MA is currently putting together a seminar series on Health and Safety in Construction. Please watch for additional information coming soon.

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