Worker-focused Approaches to Reducing Opioid Addiction and Overdose

Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety & Health
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MassCOSH:
Our mission is to ensure that all workers can earn a fair wage, be treated with respect and dignity, and return home to their families alive and well.

- **Immigrant Worker Center** – network of immigrant workers who, with tools and support of peers/allies, join together to defend right to safe, decent jobs and change public policy.

- **Teens Lead @ Work** – teens lead efforts to protect youth from injury and death & educate their peers across the country

- **Labor-Environment** – workers, community groups, unions find common ground to support union campaigns and address toxics/hazards/unsafe workplaces in communities, includes Health Schools Initiative

- **Family of Fallen Workers Support Services** - provide resources and assistance to families who have lost a loved one on the job; organize Workers’ Memorial Day /report and advocate for life saving protections at city, state and federal level

- **The New England Consortium (TNEC)** – provide safety and health trainings (HAZWOPER, OSHA 10, 30, Construction) to private and public employers – with UMASS Lowell, CSEA & 5 COSH groups
MassCOSH Organizes and Empowers Workers

Safety & Health Training

Actions

Campaigns and Coalitions

Media & reports
Participatory, worker-led research

Opportunities for workers to tell their stories to decision-makers

Access to Legal and other Resources
Dying for Work

Each year, MassCOSH releases a report in conjunction with our observance of Worker Memorial Day:

• Details worker fatalities in the previous year

• Identifies who is dying from work and what is killing them

• Articles and themes are determined by a committee of experts in occupational health and safety (Health Tech Committee)

• Our goal is to use the report to highlight MassCOSH campaigns
Changing Data: Changing our Report

For the first time, MassCOSH retroactively adjusted the total number of fatalities for 2016 in our report on 2017 data because we can no longer ignore the impact of opioid addiction on workers. It is an important cause or workplace fatality that must be studied and addressed.

![Workplace Fatalities from Suicide and Overdose](chart.png)
MA DPH study finds that rates of fatal overdose are higher in occupations known to have high rates of work-related injury

Construction is among the hardest hit:

- According to the MA DPH study, the opioid-related death rate for those employed as construction and extraction workers was six times the average rate for all Massachusetts workers.

- In an earlier analysis of opioid deaths by occupation, the Mystic Valley Public Health Coalition found that 43% were in the building trades and/or laborers.
The changing nature of work has made it worse: fear of losing their job, lack of sick time, and lack of access to real injury treatment causes workers to work in pain. This leads to a high use of painkillers. While these may have been benign in the past, opioid painkillers can be addictive and deadly.

A high percentage of hotel housekeepers experience workplace pain, ranging from 77% to 91%.

Workplace pain is so severe that over 65% of hotel housekeepers who reported workplace pain took pain medication and over 60% visited a doctor.

Working in pain is not new:

MassCOSH partnered with UNITE HERE to on a study looking at injury and pain in hotel housekeepers in 2006
It was no accident. The makers of opioids knew the dangers, and specifically marketed to lower income, less educated communities with high rates of workplace injury.
How do we create a workers’ rights approach to preventing and treating opioid addiction?

Prevent injuries from happening in the first place.

If injuries occur, make sure that workers are aware of the risks of opioid painkillers, can get the treatment they need to heal and return to work, and access to effective alternative pain treatment.

If a worker becomes addicted, ensure they have access to effective substance abuse treatment without stigma.
Learning from the MassCOSH Immigrant Worker Center
Injured Workers Committee

Access to legal support for workers compensation claims.

Support from MassCOSH staff and other injured workers to navigate the system from start to finish.

Training on workplace hazards.

Empowerment approach designed to build the leadership capacity of injured workers as leaders in efforts for safer workplaces.
The Changing Nature of Work is taking its toll on Workers – Policy Change is Needed Too

• All workers need paid sick time
• Improvements to the Workers Compensation System – delayed treatment (or inadequate treatment) can lead to long-term chronic pain.
• Compassionate drug testing that helps workers gain access to needed services without stigma, and that allows them to return to work when they are ready (MAT).
• The on-demand labor force of the “Gig Economy” are often misclassified of independent contractors making theme exempt from minimum wage protections and making their employers exempt from paying taxes, providing workers compensation and any liability.
Opioid Awareness Peer Training Pilot
September 2018 – June 30 2019

Thanks to support from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and partnership with CPH-NEW Total Worker Center at Umass Lowell

Goals:
● Educate workers to better understand the risks of opioid painkillers used for chronic conditions and alternative pain treatments available that are more effective and less dangerous.

● Empower workers to be able to advocate for themselves before an injury occurs, during and after medical or dental treatment and when they return to work, to ensure accommodations are made so they can return to work safely.

● Educate workers about addiction treatment services that are available to them and their family and friends and how to utilize these services without stigma or risking their job.
Partner with three Unions to provide opioid awareness training BEFORE injuries even occur.

- Conduct a brief needs assessment to customize training and support to each Union or worksite. Working with other local partners in Mystic River Valley and Barnstable County to develop curricula.
- Conduct one, full-day train-the-trainer session for 2 peer leaders from each site to build their capacity as peer trainers to train and support their fellow workers on the issue.
- Provide technical assistance and support to each peer leader to conduct 2 trainings
- Evaluate the pilot project to identify factors that promote or inhibit participation of unions and worker centers, the effectiveness of peer-to-peer model for educating workers, and the potential for the model’s dissemination through a wider workforce.
- Also incorporate the training into our Immigrant Worker Center and Teens Lead @ Work programs
WHEN WE FIGHT TOGETHER

... WE WIN TOGETHER
Go Red Sox!!!!