

# OPIOID EPIDEMIC

## Indiana Workforce Recovery Assists Employers

By Charlee Beasor

Julia walks into the office of her company's human resources manager and says, "I have a problem with prescription painkillers. I need help and I don't know where to go. I don't want to lose my job."

Julia has been an excellent long-term employee. But her direct supervisor has noticed that Julia has been taking an increasing number of sick days. Her production has been lagging.

The HR manager directs Julia to the right resources. With the full support of her employer, she takes a leave and enters a treatment

program that is partially covered through the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Julia goes from treatment to recovery and is able to come back to work.

But in far too many cases, the story turns out differently. The Julias of the world don't tell anyone they are struggling, come to work impaired and cause an accident. Or employers don't have the direct knowledge or resources to help.

This particular scenario is not real. But with Indiana and the nation in the throes of an opioid crisis, employers are often on the front lines of dealing with situations just like Julia's.

"When employers have that vested interest in the health and well-being of their employees, it's important for them to ensure employees that if they do need treatment, that their jobs will be there," states Jennifer

Pferrer, executive director of the Wellness Council of Indiana and manager of the Indiana Workforce Recovery initiative.

Think your industry is immune? Think again. Pferrer reiterates the statistic that 58% of individuals with opioid addictions are in the workplace.

"We need employers to understand that even if they don't think it's within their workforce, it is," she asserts.

Consider these recent outreaches to the Indiana Chamber's HR Helpline.

"One phone call was, 'I sent home an employee because she's on prescriptions, but had to have another employee drive her and now I'm out two employees for the day. What's my next step?' Another was, 'We found a new employee in a parking lot with a needle in her arm, overdosed. What do we do?' A third: 'We had somebody overdose in our bathroom.'"

Pferrer continues, "It is real, and we hope the impact of Indiana Workforce Recovery is that we can position employers to be in a proactive position, as opposed to reacting to a crisis in the workplace."

### Initiative brings forces together

Indiana Workforce Recovery is a joint effort between the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, the Wellness Council of Indiana, the Indiana Chamber Foundation and Gov. Eric Holcomb's administration. The initiative launched in February 2018.

"The Governor got involved (from day one in office) to truly declare a crisis in the state of Indiana, and he looked to the Indiana Chamber to take a statewide business perspective on what the opioid crisis really meant and how we could be part of the solution," Pferrer notes.

Early efforts have resulted in forming a peer review panel that meets monthly to discuss the issues, examine potential solutions and pose questions.

The Wellness Council, in conjunction with the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA), will host employer-focused events in six areas of the state where FSSA has opened expanded Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) facilities. A meeting in Fort Wayne will occur on October 3; Terre



Indiana Workforce Recovery is the recipient of a \$25,000 grant from Rx Abuse Leadership Initiative (RALI) Indiana to assist with the mission of helping Indiana employers deal with the opioid epidemic, including safe disposal of prescription drugs.

Haute is confirmed for October 16. Other dates are to be determined.

Additionally, a Mental Health First Aid Training component was added as a pre-conference workshop before the 2018 Indiana Health and Wellness Summit.

“We hope that as we convene employers we can offer them best practices and benchmarks that they can update and improve as they develop policies and internal processes to support people in recovery,” Pferrer maintains. “(These issues) are everywhere. And it’s going to take partnerships across all sectors, across all industries, to make a difference. The Chamber is bridging the gap for employers.”

### Stay out of crisis mode

Susan Rider and Karl Ahlrichs of Gregory & Appel, an Indianapolis-based insurance company, offer some solutions for employers today, with policies that can be put in place before a crisis occurs.

“Unfortunately, we have gotten calls when they’re in the midst of chaos and many times that leads to a three-way call with us and their legal counsel,” explains Rider, benefits and human capital consultant.

Investing in an enhanced EAP can provide more mental health and substance use disorder coverage.

But the most impactful pieces are cultural. Company leaders are advised to embrace a culture of communication and acceptance.

“Employers can train their managers to have the constant check-in with all employees,” asserts Ahlrichs, senior consultant of employee benefits. “Having a regular communication pattern means each employee has a moment in private, where they could raise a warning flag.”

That requires managers checking in with team members and not just assuming high-performers don’t need that touch point, he says.

Pferrer shares that each employer has to do what’s best for each workplace.

“There’s definitely not a one-size-fits-all answer and the solutions we’re finding are very tailored and specific to the employer’s needs and that’s what makes it challenging – that everybody is looking at this differently,” she states.

“One of the ultimate goals of the initiative is to destigmatize addiction,” she continues. “It needs to be treated and

Wellness Council of Indiana Executive Director Jennifer Pferrer says one goal of the Indiana Workforce Recovery initiative is to “put employers as part of the solution.”



perceived as a chronic condition.”

What else can employers do today? Take a peek under the hood.

“Let the data tell the story. Look at your data. Look at your health care claims. Look at your medical spend. Look at your pharmacy spend. Look at your recruitment and retention practices. Look at your policies,” Pferrer outlines. “It will tell you a lot. It will tell you if you’re recovery-friendly or not. It will tell you if there are things you can do with your benefit plan design that might improve employee engagement.”

### Communities at the forefront

Jennifer Swartz leads the Tippecanoe County Drug-Free Coalition, which is the Local Coordinating Council (LCC) for the county. State law mandates each county have an LCC, though some are more robust than others.

“This opioid crisis has brought (the LCC system) more to light than ever before. And one of the things that’s happened in our community has been primarily what we’re doing through the opioid task force,” she explains.

Swartz and Michael Budd, CEO of the Greater Lafayette United Way, and other community leaders have been coordinating on various efforts and bringing the necessary leaders to the table.

“There are really awesome things that

are happening in our community right now and are happening through the opioid task force,” Swartz maintains. “We have partnerships with the local police departments to help get the drugs off the street. We had purchased lock boxes so people can properly lock up prescriptions.”

Coming together quickly as a community has worked in the favor of Tippecanoe County.

“We’re seeing more and more people try to have a better understanding of addiction,” Swartz says. “It’s a disease. It’s a medical issue. It’s not a moral issue.”

But Swartz is quick to point out that opioids are no longer the most abused types of drugs; methamphetamine has become the biggest problem there. The good news is that the community team is in place.

“We came together to address this crisis on a level we had never seen before. The efforts put into place on substance use disorders, treatment to deal with them, far exceeds just tackling the opioid issue,” she declares.

Adapting to the next crisis is one of the underlying themes of Indiana Workforce Recovery’s efforts.

“The conversation today might be on opioids, but it might be something different in a few years,” Pferrer asserts, “We want to equip employers to respond to public health crises, whatever that public health crisis is.”

**RESOURCES:** Karl Ahlrichs and Susan Rider, Gregory & Appel, at [www.gregoryappel.com](http://www.gregoryappel.com) | Jennifer Pferrer, Wellness Council of Indiana, at [www.wellnessindiana.org](http://www.wellnessindiana.org) | Jennifer Swartz, Drug-Free Coalition of Tippecanoe County, at [www.drugfreetippecanoe.org](http://www.drugfreetippecanoe.org)