

Recovery-friendly workplaces gain momentum in RI. Why it's important for all employees



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PROVIDENCE – When she was governor, Gina Raimondo made a point of enlisting people who were openly in recovery to leadership posts in her administration. Now-Providence Mayor Brett Smiley served as her chief of staff.

Tom Coderre co-chaired the state’s task force to address the opioid crisis and held a role as acting director of the state Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals. He now ranks as the first person in recovery to serve as the principal deputy assistant secretary of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

With that in mind, Raimondo followed New Hampshire’s lead in 2018 in launching the Rhode Island Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative aimed at expanding job opportunities for Rhode Islanders in recovery, raising awareness around substance use disorders and reducing stigma surrounding that and mental health. The initiative was supported by a \$4 million federal labor grant.

Today, 151 Rhode Island workplaces are certified or in the process of becoming certified as recovery-friendly workplaces. They vary from the meal delivery company Feast & Fettle to the City of East Providence itself, the Warwick Public Library, a Warren mocktail maker, leaders in the construction

industry and the not-for-profit insurer Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island.



“Recovery is so important to your business,” said Candace Rogers, lead administrator of prevention and recovery Services at BHDDH. “The workplace is a good place to reach people.”

Recovery-friendly initiative gains momentum

The initiative offers employers a recovery-friendly adviser to help guide the effort; case management; and assistance in accessing treatment, peer support services, and training. Plus, employees are trained in administering naloxone, a nasal spray that rapidly reverses opioid overdoses. Employers can attend trainings to keep up-to-date on best practices in the field.

The program initially operated at Rhode Island College with funding from BHDDH, but was brought in-house to BHDDH in March 2023, according to agency spokesman Randal Edgar.

The effort picked up steam late last year with the appointment of Jeffrey S. Wolfsberg as director. With more and more enterprises signing on, the intention is to destigmatize recovery and foster supportive environments for people to seek and sustain their recovery.

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Rhode Island has been hard hit by the opioid crisis. The state suffered a record 436 opioid-related overdose deaths in 2022, a figure that retreated slightly last year to 404.

Cost to workplaces in the trillions

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, substance-use disorders are affecting workplaces across the nation as the use of illicit drugs increased by almost 500% from 2012 to 2020. It is estimated that 70.4%, or about 13.6 million, workers experiencing an alcohol or illicit drug use disorder are employed.

Some industries and occupations encounter higher rates of substance use disorders and overdose deaths – both of which can have grave safety consequences, reduce productivity and hurt the bottom line. The construction and fishing industries – big enterprises in Rhode Island – experienced some of the highest drug overdose death rates.



Workers who are struggling miss workdays, have reduced productivity, higher health care costs and increased disability. A CDC study said that opioid use disorder and fatal overdoses cost the U.S. economy \$1.02 trillion in 2017.

“The goal is to create a high level of awareness,” said Bob Kunz, the corporate safety director at Dimeo Construction Co. Since 2022, DiMeo has had naloxone, commonly known as Narcan, at job sites after a worker experienced an overdose that left his coworkers and supervisors traumatized. The company has helped get 19 workers into recovery over the last decade.

A 2023 report by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences looking at 31 states with recovery-friendly initiatives recommended that officials should follow the lead of New Hampshire and Rhode Island in developing resources to support employer certification as recovery-friendly establishments.

“Rhode Island is by far a step ahead in many respects,” Kunz said.

Better job retention, increased productivity

But practically speaking, a supportive environment leads to better job retention, increased productivity and heightened safety, according to Thomas Martin, director of the division of behavioral healthcare at BHDDH.

“If you have supportive management and a supportive work environment, you have much better outcomes,” Martin said.

The initiative also focuses on building a network of peers with lived experience to offer understanding, guidance and support to people who are struggling.

“People should be treated the same across the board, regardless of the issue,” Martin said.

Kunz, whose business encompasses some 1,500 workers across three states, puts it simply.

“Life’s messy at times. It’s really important that we begin to understand and have empathy for one another,” he said. “The goal is not to exclude workers who are struggling.”