

**Employee Alcohol Abuse:
Is It Costing Your Government Money?**

**A Report on the Impact of Employee Alcohol Abuse on
Governments**

September 18, 2003

This report was produced by the
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments



Abstract

- Title:** Employee Alcohol Abuse:
Is It Costing Your Government Money?
A Report on the Impact of Employee Alcohol Abuse on Governments
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Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
- Agency:** The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is the regional organization of the Washington area's major local governments and their elected officials. COG works toward solutions on regional issues such as growth, transportation, affordable housing, air pollution, water supply and quality, and economic development. COG serves as the regional planning organization for the metropolitan Washington area.
- Abstract:** Health care spending has been on the increase since the late 1990's. Employers are searching for ways to manage these costs and the associated reasons for these increases. Many employers are unaware that alcohol use is one of the factors. In fact, health care costs for employees who have alcohol problems are nearly twice as high as for those who do not. (NIAAA. 2000. Tenth special U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health. Washington: U.S. Department of Human Services.)
- This report provides information on the estimated direct health care costs for alcohol-related injuries and health problems, and the indirect costs for absenteeism, productivity, workplace injuries, workers compensation, and disability claims that all affect employer's bottom lines. Expanding treatment benefits makes good fiscal sense. Research has shown that alcohol treatment saves money over the long run.
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(Source: Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems-The George Washington University Medical Center)

The Problem

Alcohol abuse is a major problem for employers everywhere. While most employers don't tolerate drinking on the job, many are less aware of workplace problems resulting from problem drinking off the job. Individuals who drink before work, during lunch, or after work as well as during work hours, present a potentially harmful situation for any employer. Drinking during work hours or at lunch may be more easily identified, but drinking during non-work hours may create less obvious problems that are costly to the employer and more difficult to deal with. Even problem drinking by an employee's relatives can be costly to an employer. These problems usually are exhibited in the following ways:

- **Absenteeism**
- **Performance and productivity**
- **Accidents**
- **Cost through loss of staff and recruitment**

Put another way, when an employee or a family member has an alcohol problem, employers face increased healthcare costs, lost productivity, absenteeism, accidents, staff turnover, and liability. Healthcare costs for the untreated substance-abusing employee cost the employer an estimated \$640 million annually. (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, January 1999).

Almost half of all trauma and injury visits to hospital emergency rooms, and between 20 and 30 percent of all trips to the emergency room are alcohol related. (CDC 2000 Alcohol Problems Among Emergency Department Patients: Proceedings of a Research Conference on Identification and Prevention). Employees who are under stress due to alcohol abuse by a spouse or other family member also have lower productivity and a higher rate of absenteeism.

Staff turnover is high when alcohol is abused. Yet, employers often may find it more cost effective to help an employee deal with the problem rather than recruiting and training a new employee.

Liability costs are higher with alcohol abusers because the company is responsible for the safety of other employees and the public. Additionally, company equipment may get damaged, and work may have to be repeated, because of sloppy or incorrect work. Problem drinkers and their family members also have higher healthcare care costs.

According to the CDC, excessive alcohol use is a key factor in more than 100,000 deaths per year in the U.S. Approximately 20-30% of patients seen in U.S. emergency departments have problems related to alcohol abuse. Nearly half of alcohol-related deaths are the result of injuries from motor vehicle crashes, falls, fires, drowning, homicides, and suicides. Insurance companies may refuse to pay for treatment when alcohol is a factor in an injury, preventing emergency medical staff from providing intervention or referrals for substance abuse treatment. Yet studies have shown that providing treatment for alcohol addiction lowers healthcare costs for the entire family more than enough to offset the cost of the treatment.

The Challenge

The public perception of workers with alcohol dependency issues evokes images of employees drinking at the workplace. However, a more accurate portrayal is what happens to the workplace as a result of alcohol dependence and associated problem behaviors off the job. Problem behaviors may include binge drinking, drinking and driving, drinking and violence, or hangovers. Habitual heavy drinkers also can cause family stress and contribute to mental illness.

Alcohol abuse exacts a heavy toll on productivity and destroys individuals, families, and communities. Nearly eight million Americans suffer from alcoholism, and nearly six million have related problems, according to the report, "Public Health Implications of Excessive Alcohol Consumption" by Drs. Glen Hanson and Kai Li. They also found that the economic cost of substance abuse exceeds \$484 billion per year, with \$185 billion attributable to alcohol abuse. The misuse of alcohol, as well as smoking and illicit drug use, accounts for untold numbers of illnesses, disabilities, and deaths. Substance abuse is preventable like many other health challenges. Of the more than two million U.S. deaths each year, approximately one in four is attributable to alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use. Despite family hardship and business loss, only two to three million individuals are treated per year.

The Alcohol Cost Calculator

Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, an initiative of the George Washington University Medical Center, has devised a new tool to demonstrate how alcohol-related problems increase health care costs and reduce workforce productivity. This tool, the Alcohol Cost Calculator, provides actual, industry-specific information about the impact of drinking. Released publicly in April 2003, it computes business losses due to alcohol abuse in actual dollars. The Alcohol Cost Calculator examines the following areas:

- Prevalence of alcohol related problems in different sectors
- Absenteeism
- Decreased productivity
- Extent of employees' alcohol-related hospital and emergency room visits

Listed below are the cost calculations for the 18 city and county government workforces in the COG footprint. Workforce numbers were provided to COG by the jurisdictions' human resource departments and public information offices. The Alcohol Cost Calculator was utilized to prepare calculations for each of the local governments.

Alcohol Cost Calculation for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Members

	Number of Government Employees	Estimated number of problem drinkers in workplace	Number of family members who are problem drinkers	Work days lost because of sickness, injury, and absence	Approximate work days of lowered productivity	Alcohol-related healthcare costs (in thousands)
Alexandria, VA	2,000	100	254	942	500	\$532
Arlington, VA	3,427	171	436	1,614	857	\$911
Bowie, MD	203	10	26	96	51	\$54
College Park, MD	125	6	16	59	31	\$33
District of Columbia	30000	1500	3815	14,130	7,500	\$8,000
Fairfax City, VA	392	20	50	185	98	\$104
Fairfax Co., VA	11,411	571	1,451	5,375	2,853	\$3000
Falls Church, VA	250	12	32	118	62	\$66
Frederick Co., MD	1,800	90	229	848	450	\$478
Gaithersburg, MD	250	12	32	118	62	\$66
Greenbelt, MD	170	8	22	80	42	\$45
Loudoun Co., VA	2,466	123	314	1,161	616	\$655
Manassas, VA	410	20	52	193	102	\$109
Mont. Co., MD	8,099	405	1,030	3,815	2,025	\$2200
Prince George's Co., MD	5659	283	720	2,665	1,415	\$1500
Prince William Co., VA	3,300	165	420	1,554	825	\$88
Rockville, MD	525	26	67	247	131	\$140
Takoma Park, MD	120	6	15	57	30	\$32
Totals	70,607	3,528	8,981	33,257	17,650	\$18,700

Covering Alcohol Treatment Makes Sense

Direct healthcare costs for alcohol-related injuries and health problems and indirect costs for absenteeism, productivity, workplace injuries, worker's compensation, and disability claims all affect employers' bottom lines. Expanding treatment benefits makes good fiscal sense. Research shows that alcohol treatment pays for itself in subsequent healthcare reductions.

A study by Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems shows that one employee prevention resource might include comprehensive health insurance benefits (alcohol treatment comparable to other medical conditions and illnesses). A managed care plan would pay an extra \$5.00 per member per year to include insurance coverage for alcohol or other drug addiction. Human resources departments should work with their health plans to develop the continuum of care for alcohol abuse.

Alcohol abuse is not readily obvious, manifesting itself in emergency room visits, extra hospital days, and missed days from work. Employers can implement preventative strategies to reduce costs.

Another cost saving measure is intervention, which consists of providing as many as four short counseling sessions to discuss problem drinking and health risks. They may be conducted by primary care practitioners, mental health specialists -- including social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and substance abuse counselors, or the Employee Assistance Program staff.

Praise of the Tool

“This excellent new tool will be invaluable in efforts to educate the American public and businesses about the impact of alcohol abuse. Using this calculator, businesses will be able to quantify the economic costs of untreated alcohol abuse and will take steps to provide treatment for their employees.”

- Congressman Jim Ramstad (D-MN), U.S. House of Representatives

“The Alcohol Cost Calculator gives employers reliable, quantitative evidence of alcohol’s impact on their workforce. This tool will provide the business cause to reduce costs and health effects by preventing and treating alcohol abuse appropriately.”

- Helen Darling, president of the Washington Business Group on Health.

“The data analyzed by Ensuring Solutions came from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Household Survey on Drug Abuse. Eighty percent of problem drinkers are employed. Companies can combat alcohol abuse by addressing it in totum with other preventative workplace health activities. The sooner you intervene in alcohol abuse -- before a person loses a job or a family -- the more likely that treatment will be successful.”

-Charles Curie, an administrator with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

“We are pleased that data derived from National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) supported research that helped produce a tool that employers can use to understand the impact of alcohol on the health of their businesses and their employees.”

- Dr. Ting-Kai Li, the Director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

“ We believe this is a useful tool that can help focus attention on a very important issue.”

- Eric Goplerud, Ph.D., Director of Ensuring Solutions

Strategies for Businesses

Ensuring Solutions suggests the following strategies for businesses:

- Offer comprehensive health Insurance
- Monitor and maintain standard of care
- Enact treatment-oriented workplace policies
- Intensify health education
- Promote confidential screening
- Offer/expand employee assistance programs
- Manage employees' time off

Appendix A:

Reports for Member Jurisdictions



The Alcohol Cost Calculator



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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 2000

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	100
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	254
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	942
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	500
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$531,524

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WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MAKE YOUR WORKPLACE SAFER, HEALTHIER, AND MORE PRODUCTIVE

1. Provide confidential alcohol screenings for all employees. Offer brief intervention services for individuals who are not yet dependent on alcohol.
2. Offer health insurance coverage to treat alcoholism the same way that other chronic illnesses are treated.
3. Set up and/or strengthen Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to actively identify and assist people with drinking problems.

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 3427

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	171
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	436
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	1,614
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	857
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$910,766

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 203

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	10
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	26
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	96
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	51
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$53,950

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 125

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	6
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	16
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	59
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	31
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$33,220

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 30000

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	1,500
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	3,815
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	14,130
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	7,500
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$7,972,860

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 392

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	20
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	50
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	185
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	98
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$104,179

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 11411

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	571
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	1,451
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	5,375
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	2,853
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$3,032,610

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 250

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	12
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	32
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	118
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	62
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$66,440

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 1800

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	90
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	229
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	848
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	450
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$478,372

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 170

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	8
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	22
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	80
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	42
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$45,180

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 170

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	8
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	22
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	80
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	42
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$45,180

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 2466

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	123
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	314
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	1,161
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	616
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$655,369

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 410

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	20
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	52
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	193
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	102
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$108,962

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 8099

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	405
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	1,030
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	3,815
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	2,025
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$2,152,406

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 5659

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace: **283**

Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers: **720**

Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year: **2,665**

Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company: **1,415**

Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays: **\$1,503,947**

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: 3300

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	165
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	420
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	1,554
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	825
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$877,015

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EMPLOYEES: 525

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	26
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	67
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	247
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	131
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$139,525

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Government Industries

EMPLOYEES: *120*

Likely number of problem drinkers in your workplace:	6
Likely number of employee family members who are problem drinkers:	15
Likely number of work days your company loses to sickness, injury, and absence because of problem drinking every year:	57
Likely number of work days of lowered productivity associated with alcohol use by workers in your company:	30
Likely alcohol-related healthcare costs that your company pays:	\$31,891

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