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Factory offers self-help for employee alcoholics

BY SHERRY KAHAN

Until last April, Clembio Clemens, an employee at Detroit Diesel Allison in Redford Township, was one of more than nine million Americans who are alcoholics.

He spent most of his time in bars, neglected his family and began to have black-outs.

"I gradually had to face the facts that I, Clembio Clemens, at 41, was an alcoholic and no longer able to control my drinking or my actions," he recently wrote in his union newspaper.

Luckily there was a place to go for aid. Clemens got in touch with Operation Self Help run both by his company and his union, the United Auto Workers.

"Self Help is mainly a referral agency," stated Edward Boyd, supervisor of the program for the company, a division of General Motors Corp. "We talk to the employee and tell him we can help. Then we put him in touch with qualified professional people."

"Everything is confidential," pointed out Mike Le Mieux, who works with Ernest Friday, represents UAW local 403 on Operation Self Help.

"Some hourly people worry that the company will use the information against them. But I'm there to say it will help them more."

"The UAW is in this to help the employee keep his job, his family, his life and his home."

Last April his union brother, Clemens, was admitted to Kingsley Hospital and received what he called a new lease on life.

"It's a wonderful feeling to have control of yourself again," observed the former alcoholic, who has learned he cannot use alcoholic beverages any more.

Operation Self Help offers Detroit Diesel's more than 1,000 employees the opportunity to try to solve their problems through any one of 35 carefully screened organizations on its list of area resources. They serve a wide range of human difficulties: alcoholism, drugs, emotional, credit, legal and family problems.

But the help most frequently requested is for alcoholism.

It might be said that the operation first edged its way off the ground when Tony McKnight of Livonia, now coordinator of Self Help, took it upon himself to interest some of the plant doctors in Alcoholics Anonymous on an informal basis.

A recovered alcoholic, McKnight said, "A stranger extended to me a helping hand when I was at rock bottom, so I guess I felt bound by my conscience to do something for someone else needing help."

McKnight was well aware of the effect on drinking as far as a job was concerned.

"It means absenteeism, performance problems, incomplete assignments, tardiness and difficulty getting along with the other workers," he declared.

John Laman of Lathrup Village, director of talented personnel who has responsibility for the new operation, said the company backed the program for two reasons.

"It was a moral responsibility to our people," he commented. "We felt we had to do more than have people come to work and collect their pay. As we help our employees, we help ourselves."

This philosophy led to the main reason for backing Self Help.

"Alcoholics miss work two and a half times more than non-alcoholics," he said.

"When an employee is absent, we have to put someone in his place and train him for the job. It's a real problem to the corporation when the absentee rate is high."

"We found if we reduced the number of alcoholics, we could reduce the number of absentees."

Boyd pointed to a before and after study of 80 of the 325 employees participating in the program.

After being helped they took home that year an extra \$102,000 wages as a result of a reduction in their absenteeism.

"Those same 80 people cost us \$80,000 in sick leave benefits relating to their problems," said Laman. "That doesn't even count their loss of productivity. The year after treatment the cost was only \$8,000."

Cutting absenteeism is of substantial benefit to the corporation.

He added, "We're not bleeding hearts, but this is a problem that has been dubbed and ignored for years. There is much to be gained by taking it straight on."

"We don't baby them. But we provide understanding and support. The employees know that if their performance suffers badly they can literally lose their job."

Laman explained that what turned a flagging drunk and drug program into a full-scale self help operation was a discovery.

"Alcohol is not the only problem of an alcoholic," he began. "His problems may also be emotional, financial or involve his family. When you get involved in a program like this you have to get involved in all these other things as well."

Boyd pointed out that the cost of treatment is handled by the company's medical insurance programs.

Its success is due to its credibility, he believed. "Our boss, John Laman, doesn't know who is in the program," he maintained. "Contacts are strictly confidential and the employees know that. When they have been helped they may send another person to us."

McKnight wondered why more women at the plant did not avail themselves of alcoholic counseling.

"Women suffer alcoholism the same degree as men, but so far only one woman has come forward for aid," he said. "I'd like to encourage them to use the program. After all, alcoholism is now classed as a disease and is no longer a social disgrace, and sometimes a woman alcoholic can cause more family problems than a male drinker."

"They shouldn't try to hide it. Actually, there are more wives of employees in the program than female employees."

Boyd observed, "People problems are family problems. We've found when we are able to motivate an employee and the spouse to seek solutions, we get better re-

sults that working with just one person alone."



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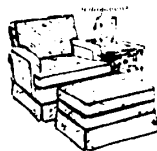
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