

Businesses try to cure alcohol absenteeism

By Mike Scanlon
staff writer

Until somebody figures a way to put a price tag on a broken home, the social costs of alcoholism will remain undetermined.

The economic costs are something different. Booze is a big headache for business, and it costs plenty.

There are some 1.8 million people in the tri-county workforce, and the National Council on Alcoholism estimates as many as 180,000 of them are alcoholics. Perhaps half as many again are "troubled" by use of other drugs or emotional problems.

Their employers' annual tab? It's estimated at \$542 million. At an average area annual pay of \$16,000, the council figures each alcoholic costs his or her employer \$4,000 a year in the form of higher rates of absenteeism and productivity rates 35 percent below normal.

Increasing numbers of companies are trying to do something about it.

MICHIGAN BELL Telephone Co. is one of them.

"People with problems can't always leave them at the doorstep the way we always said they should," explains Robert Doran, who runs the company's employee assistance program.

"We deal with any problem that plagues employees here, and if we don't have the skills to deal with it, then we first help in the community," explains William Booker, who runs the U.S. Postal Service Program for Alcoholism Recovery (PAR).

Neither Booker nor Doran, you'll note, said he deals only with alcoholics. They don't.

"It's not too often that you see problems all by themselves," said Doran, whose program is in its seventh year. "The emotional category would seem to be the biggest single category. We see family-marital problems as a very incidental problem. Some of those are related to alcohol and drug-related problems."

DORAN ESTIMATES 34 percent of the Bell employees entering the program suffer from emotional problems, 20 percent are alcoholics and 24 percent have family-marital problems. "About 30 percent of the problems we have would not have their roots in alcohol," said Booker. "We have the social conflict problem, the undetected legitimate illness and just plain laziness."

"We find people who use both alcohol and pills, so it's hard to differentiate. It all causes chronic organic brain damage anyway, so it doesn't matter

whether you get your high from a cup or a needle or a jug."

Both Bell and the post office are largely successful in dealing with employee problems.

"It would be hard to put a percentage on it, but by far most (employees referred to Bell's program) are still employed here," said Doran.

Booker said the postal service's program — which requires employees to participate for three years — has a 79 percent success rate with drug and alcohol users.

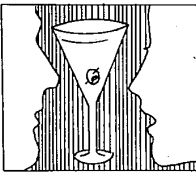
"Our program dwarfs anything else because most programs do not have a measured success rate," said Booker.

"We define success as people who stay sober for one year," added Booker, a recovered alcoholic who quit drinking July 8, 1984. The Detroit PAR program began nine years ago, and the staff of five counselors has since treated 822 employees.

"If you stay sober one year, you are likely to continue being sober," added Booker.

SO WHY require employees to participate in a three-year program, as PAR is?

"The therapeutic effects of the group sessions keep them ever aware they are an alcoholic, and if their thinking relaxes, then drinking action will fol-



low. It has been our experience that if an employee stops attending meetings, then drinking follows within three to six months."

Booker and Doran differed on employees most likely to become alcoholics, with Doran noting a statistical edge for the likes of telephone installers who spend large amounts of time outside the office.

Booker noted that more letter carriers are in the PAR program than other occupational groups within the postal service, "but that's because the carriers union in more diligent in getting them help."

"You don't know the postal service. We will find a way to get a jug regard-

"ONE OF the major programs today is trying to get executives to make use of the program," said Doran. "The people we see are much more highly represented in the non-management groups."

"We bend over backwards to maintain confidentiality, but at the same time a person, with aspirations of climbing the ladder might go to great lengths" to conceal a drinking problem, Doran said. A good company-union relationship such as Doran said exists at Michigan Bell is also likely to contribute a higher percentage of union member participants, he said.

Self-denial is often a difficulty, Doran said.

"Many people we see have never discussed this with anybody before. They don't even admit it to you if they're sitting in your office drunk at the time," he said.

BOTH THE Postal Service and Michigan Bell were among 15 corporations and unions recognized for their occupational alcoholism programs. The others were: American Natural Service Co.; Awwry; Bakeries Inc.; City of Detroit; Conrail; Detroit Edison; Detroit Fire and Police departments; Ford Motor Co.; General Motors Corp.; Kelsey-Hayes Corp. and Tarcom.

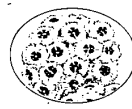
For small companies, however, set-

ting up their own occupational alcoholism programs is difficult. The NCA in Detroit has established a program, titled Dignity, designed to help employers help themselves. On a consultation basis, Dignity counselors train supervisors and managers within a company to recognize when an employee is having a problem.

Employees also may seek assistance on a voluntary basis without going through company channels. In all instances, information is kept confidential.

The Dignity program is offered to all companies in the tri-county area and is particularly set up to meet the needs of small businesses, with between 250-2,000 employees. For more information regarding the program, contact Martha Johnson at the NCA, 963-0581.

Through the program, Ms. Johnson says that companies demonstrating a "we care" attitude helping to strengthen employer/employee relationships.



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