

**Speakers:** Pictured right, Renee Gerger addressed identifying substance abuse in the business community. At left, Helaine Zack of Oakland Family Services and Claudette Jefferson of DTE Energy discuss the program during a break. Both were panelists.

STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL EISENBERG



## Companies urged to maintain 'drug-free' workplaces

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Michael McLean didn't think much of it when his boss asked him to attend a meeting on the morning of March 30, 1987.

As a corporate officer working in the financial industry, he was used to meetings. But this one would be different.

When McLean walked through the door, the first person he saw was his wife. She was seated near his son, whom he had dropped off at school just minutes before.

"To this day, I don't know how they got him there so fast," said McLean, who was about to undergo an intervention that would change his life.

One by one, family, friends and co-workers told McLean about the changes they'd seen in him, changes brought about by his abuse of alcohol. While his wife and boss had talked to him about his "problem" many times before, these conversations ended in denial and anger.

"This time, he said, was different. The reason I went into treatment (was that) I heard them tell me they cared," he said.

McLean's story clearly illustrated the purpose of a morning conference, "Drugs have a Face in Your Workplace," held at the William B. Costick Center in Farmington Hills. The event featured guest speakers and a panel discussion all centered around issues of drug and alcohol abuse in the workplace.

**Looking the other way**  
Wayne Circuit Judge Timothy M. Kenny provided an overview of how Michigan courts are dealing with employees who are substance abusers. He also outlined a program the courts are using to help substance abusers get treatment; most who complete it don't repeat their offense.

Nurse assessor Gayle Sturt, who works at Maple Grove, talked about the abuse of over-the-counter drugs, such as amphetamine, found in Metabolife and Ripped Energy, and dextromethorphan, a common cough suppressant. She told employers how to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse and dependency.

Often, employees with a chemical abuse problem have lost self-esteem and won't talk about their problems for fear of losing their jobs, she said. "Being in contact, being in communication with your employees makes all the difference in the world."

Renee Gerger, a professional interventionist who worked with McLean, said employers can be "enablers."

"We tend to look the other

way, because we don't know what else to do," Gerger said, urging employers to recognize substance abuse as an illness, like cancer or heart disease, rather than a sign of weakness. "I think it will help you understand people in the face of this disease are helpless."

Gerger talked about an attorney who's lost his practice, his family and his home but still couldn't see the connection to his alcohol addiction.

"The denial is so much a part of the disease that it sets up a layer between them and reality."

### Signs of abuse

Employers who see signs of abuse, such as increased absenteeism, unexplained absences during the work day, frequent illnesses and accidents, should document concerns and confront the employee. If he or she doesn't seek help, she said, another confrontation is in order.

That worked at Bob Sellers Pontiac/GMC, where one successful salesman who had a reputation for being the "life of the party" began having workplace problems. Because the company was afraid to lose his productivity, said company vice president Sam Slaughter, no one confronted him — and, in fact, some covered for him.

"I wish I would have had a program like this," Slaughter

said of the conference. "I would have done things differently."

Without an employee assistance program, which provides employees with referrals for counseling and substance abuse treatment, the company's management team eventually intervened, confronting the man and driving him to the hospital.

"That was one of the most scary things in my business career," Slaughter said.

The up side? The salesman is

now celebrating five years of sobriety and has experienced positive changes in his professional and personal life.

"We all have to have the courage to say 'This has got to stop.'"

The company has made a turn-around as well. The annual holiday party with its open bar has been replaced with a summer picnic that is alcohol-free.

"We have changed the culture in our company," Slaughter said.

Sponsored by the Hills Police Department, using drug forfeiture money, the conference was hosted by the Call to Action Coalition in cooperation with DTE Energy, Bob Sellers Pontiac/GMC, Ginopolis restaurant, Jervis B. Webb Co., Robert Bosch Corp., Farmington Public Safety Department and Farmington/Farmington Hills Chamber of Commerce.

## EAPs help employees with abuse issues

After Michael McLean's intervention, he returned to his workplace and put together an employee assistance program.

"Every organization can have a program to work with employees," said Helaine Zack of Oakland Family Services' Employee Assistance Service.

Some companies have gotten discounts on worker's compensation insurance because they've set up EAPs, Zack said.

Under the Drug-Free Workplace Act of 1998, employers can also create an environment that discourages substance abuse. The U.S. Department of Labor provides a kit to help employers establish a drug-free workplace, Zack said.

Companies create a substance abuse policy, train supervisors, educate employees, set up an employee assistance program and conduct drug and alcohol testing to qualify.

The federal law outlines the findings of Congress in relation to drug addiction and the workplace:

■ 74 percent of adults who use illegal drugs are employed;

■ absenteeism is 66 percent higher among drug users than among people who do not use drugs;

■ health benefit utilization is 300-percent higher among drug users than among people who do not use drugs;

■ 47 percent of workplace accidents are drug-related;

■ disciplinary actions are 90-percent higher among drug users than among people who do not use drugs;

■ employee turnover is significantly higher among drug users than among people who do not use drugs.

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