

Tips for Leaders:

Remote Work and Reasonable Suspicion of Impairment



COLORADO
State Employee Assistance
Program
CSEAP

Substance Use and Remote Work

Impairment due to substance use during the work day is likely [rare](#) or infrequent for our workforce. [Studies](#) indicate a workday use rate of ~4% to ~7%. However, for some workers, [isolation](#) and [access](#) to substances may encourage excessive or problematic substance use during the workday. On-the-job impairment - even while working from home - can lead to [costs and liabilities](#) associated with workplace injury. While there are limitations to reasonable suspicion testing when employees work from home, it remains critical that agency leaders address impairment affecting the workplace.

Whether due to the pandemic, lingering physical or emotional impacts of COVID, or other difficult situations, employees are experiencing stress at an unprecedented rate. As an employer, make it a priority to apply compassion and sensitivity when addressing an employee-of-concern:

- Use of alcohol and substances can be a primary yet counterproductive [coping strategy](#) in response to trauma or crisis.
- Employees may be receiving false or erroneous information about use of [alcohol during pandemic](#).
- Remote work can contribute to [social isolation](#) thus creating higher [stress or risk for employees](#).
- The current pandemic is unprecedented - while we are typically able to cope through an acute stressor and quickly return to normal functioning, a pandemic is far-reaching and can be unpredictable. Especially in the absence of adaptable coping strategies, many will use alcohol or substances to [manage](#) stress associated with mass crisis.
- Those experiencing substance abuse or addiction may be at higher risk of [COVID-19 complications](#); if you are concerned for your employee, refer them to the [Colorado State Employee Assistance Program](#) for support.
- If you suspect that your colleague, coworker, or employee is using alcohol while working from home, reach out to them and ask how they're doing; Let them know that you are concerned about them and recent changes in their behavior.

Follow Agency Policies Addressing Substance Use Impacting the Workplace:

- Work from Home (WFH) or other remote work arrangements can provide employees with easier access to alcohol or other substances thus leading to problematic workplace behaviors and subsequent impact including [injuries, sleeping on the job, and low productivity](#).
- The most noticeable behaviors that may indicate impairment while an employee is working from home could include missed meetings, slurred or incoherent speech during video meetings, bizarre behavior noticed via video, unkempt appearance including poor hygiene or inappropriate workplace attire.
- Be sure that your employees are clear that substance use during working hours - even if they work from home - is against your Workplace Impairment policy:
- Reference your agency impairment policy in your Remote Work Policy and/or your Remote Work Agreement.
- Clearly and regularly state expectations regarding alcohol and drug use as stated in your department or agency policy; Explicitly inform employees - during team and 1:1 meetings - that use during work hours or in a manner that impacts the workplace is prohibited.

- If you suspect that an employee is impaired during their work hours - even if working from home - review and follow your agency policy:
 - Agency policies can be found on your agency intranet or by contacting your Human Resources department.
 - Some agencies defer to the [State Universal Drug and Alcohol Policy](#) which addresses impairment resulting from various OTC, prescribed, legal, and illegal substances.
 - Establish and document reasonable suspicion (even if you cannot pursue testing):
 - Use an agency-approved reasonable suspicion checklist to guide your documentation.
 - If you do not have a checklist available (or your agency does not use one), focus on (and note) noticeable and contemporaneous behaviors, appearance, and speech patterns as a screening strategy.
 - Use 2 supervisors – when possible – to screen and document observations. It is best practice to document separately and on separate forms.
 - Documentation is critical; In your documentation, provide:
 - Description of the incident and observed employee behavior(s),
 - Time and Location of the incident/behaviors of concern,
- Call for help if you think your employee or coworker is in imminent danger:
 - Regardless of what type of impairment an employee may be experiencing - medical/physical or related to substance use - call 911 immediately if you feel your employee is unsafe, is showing signs of dangerous intoxication or is in medical distress e.g. threats of harm to self or others, incoherence, difficulty breathing.
- Contact your Appointing Authority, HR Director, and next-level leader to report your concerns and seek guidance:
 - Your leaders can assist in determining appropriate use of leave. If testing is available and leaders see it as necessary in the situation, administrative leave may be appropriate. If testing is not available and your employee appears to be unable to continue their workday, sick or annual leave may be appropriate:
- Address the behavior in-the-moment or as soon as possible after witnessing or experiencing the behavior.
 - Set up a 1:1 video or phone meeting with your employee. Address the concerning behaviors with the employee by stating the behaviors and concerns clearly to the employee. Allow time for your employee to respond.
 - Whenever possible have your next-level leaders, Appointing Authority, and/or HR attend this meeting in order to assist in addressing the concerns with the employee.
- Document the witnessed behavior, subsequent conversation, and the expectations communicated to the employee:
 - Prior to meeting with your employee, document your concerns on paper - use this documentation to guide the discussion with your employee. As stated above, focus on contemporaneous behaviors, appearance, and speech patterns. If your agency uses a standard reporting form, be sure to transfer your notes onto the reporting form.
 - Following your 1:1 meeting with the employee, document the conversation and the concerns that you expressed. Document your employee's response to your concerns.
 - Seek guidance from Human Resources regarding next steps in a corrective or disciplinary action process if appropriate.
- Access testing if testing is available:
 - Call your Human Resources office immediately if you feel your employee is impaired during working hours. Human Resources can assist you in determining the availability of a specimen collection site. Many facilities may be unavailable for the purposes of drug or alcohol testing during the pandemic.

- For DOT guidelines related to employees holding a CDL or other commercial transportation licenses, refer to your Human Resources department and current [Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration](#) for guidance.
- If testing is available, it must be managed in a safe manner - DO NOT ask your potentially impaired employee to transport themselves to a testing center. Follow your agency protocol regarding accompanying an employee for testing - you may be required to pick your employee up from their home in order to take them to a testing site.
- Use caution if hosting on-line happy hours:
 - Some of your employees may be in recovery; Engaging in a happy hour when all other employees are drinking could serve as a relapse trigger to sober employees experiencing increased vulnerability due to isolation.
 - Happy hours should take place following the typical work hours of your team.
 - Consider virtual games or check-ins instead of focusing on alcohol consumption.
 - If your team engages in a virtual happy hour and employees are seemingly becoming intoxicated, end the event; if you have particular concerns about an individual employee, contact them off-line to ensure they are OK.
- Refer your employee-of-concern to the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program ([CSEAP](#)):
 - CSEAP can screen for substance use disorders and problematic use, assist employees in developing healthy coping strategies, discuss underlying concerns (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression), educate employees on available treatment options, and offer support to employees in response to the pandemic.
 - Document that you've referred your employee to CSEAP; If you are approving Administrative Leave so that an employee may attend sessions during their workday, your employee may request verification of attendance from their counselor - the employee can then provide this verification to you as their supervisor or manager.

Provide your employee with resources:

- Suggest the following counseling and referral resources to employees who report that they are struggling with substance use:
 - [CSEAP Teletherapy](#)
 - [Online and Remote Resources for Addiction Support](#)
 - [CSEAP - Addiction resources webpage](#)
 - [Colorado Crisis Services](#)
 - [\(SAMHSA\) Treatment Referral Tool](#)

Suggest the following practical strategies only if asked by the employee-of-concern:

- [Coping tips](#) for trauma, disaster, stressful events
- Harvard Health Strategies for [Curbing Drinking](#)
- [Handling Urges](#) to Drink
- Resources for mindfulness or Urge Surfing ('riding out' cravings for substances):
 - Overview of [Urge Surfing](#)
 - [Step-by-step](#) instructions for Urge Surfing