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Becoming Recovery Friendly

Implications and Best Practices
Around Substance Use Disorder
in the Workplace



HRCI is the premier credentialing and learning community for the human resource profession.

For over 50 years, HRCI has set the global standard for HR expertise and excellence through its commitment to developing and advancing those in the people business. HRCI helps HR professionals and businesses achieve new competencies that drive results by creating and offering world-class learning and by administering eight global individual certifications and three organizational certifications. Today, over 500,000 HR professionals in 150+ countries have achieved HRCI certification as a mark of high professional distinction.

America's Struggle with Substances



From alcohol and opioids to cannabis legalization, America continues to struggle with substances—and no workplace is immune. Data from HRCI and Fors Marsh shows that many organizations still have work to do, and counsel from Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation suggests a plan of action.

The laws and cultural norms governing substance use in the United States are continuously changing. From prohibition to the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s, from the war on drugs to the opioid crisis and today's wave of cannabis legalization, America has continued to evolve its views on substances, legality, and where to draw lines.

It's a serious discussion. The opioid crisis killed more than 79,000 Americans in 2022, according to the National Institutes of Health. That's more than the total number of Americans who died in the Vietnam War—all in a single year. While more recent numbers show overdose deaths declining sharply in 2024, thanks in part to state and federal countermeasures, the U.S. continues to struggle with substance use on many fronts, including a wave of cannabis legalization affecting more than half the country.

The impact on the workplace is undeniable. In 2023, there were an estimated 30 million people with Substance Use Disorder (SUD) in American offices and roughly 80% were full-time workers. At the same time, only about 21 million were in recovery. An HRCI survey of hundreds of HR professionals in May showed that more than 1 in 3 (41%) occasionally observed substance use issues at work in the last year and 7% observed them frequently.

Substance use disorder (SUD) is costly to companies and nonprofits. Workers suffering from SUD take almost 50% more unscheduled days off, and their average annual turnover rate is 44% higher than the general workforce, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Add to that lost productivity, higher healthcare costs, and increased risk from workplace accidents, and the financial impact on business becomes clear.

For years now, workplace recovery has been a primary issue for HRCI. Last year, in conjunction with Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation, HRCI and other certified Recovery Friendly Workplaces participated in a roundtable hosted by the White House to discuss and support workplace recovery during National Recovery Month in September.

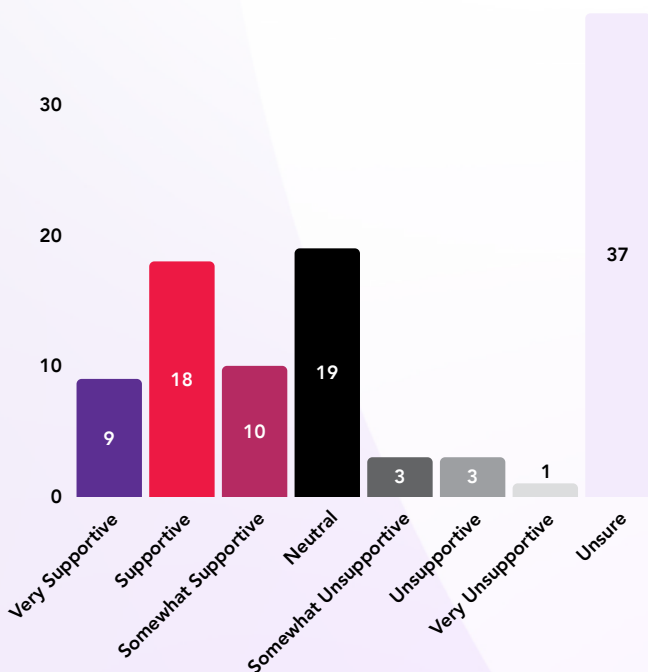
HRCI also partnered with Fors Marsh, a research firm focused on societal change, to survey more than 1,500 HR professionals on employer policies and practices related to Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and the support provided to today's workforce. The result was the [Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025](#), a report showing that many organizations have work to do when it comes to creating a recovery friendly environment.

The answer could be **getting certified as a Recovery Friendly Workplace**, an organization that is willing to help employees recover from SUD and has the policies and procedures in place—along with the training and awareness—to provide assistance. It requires organizational will and cultural change, but the benefits can be substantial.

“The numbers tell us that Substance Use Disorder is an issue every organization will confront. The question is whether we do it proactively, with constructive policies, or whether we will allow crises to dictate our decisions. Smart employers will get out front and support employees on their journey to recovery. This is an area where HR can provide leadership.”

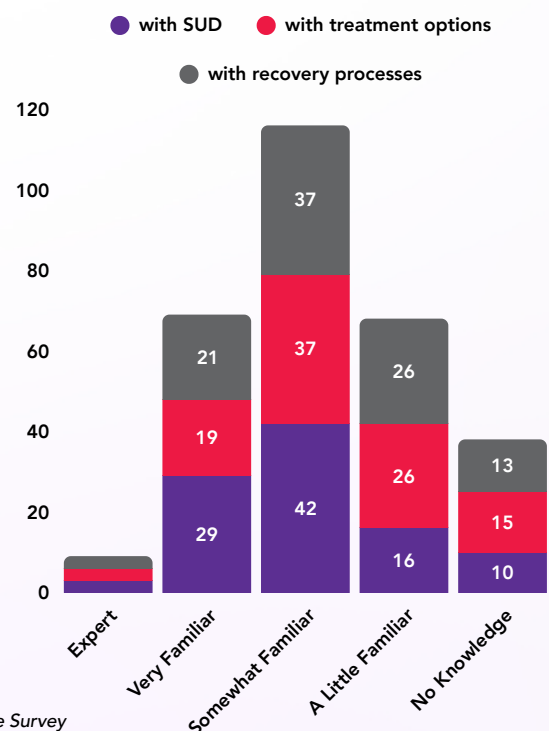
Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI

Perceived Leadership Support for the Recovery Friendly Workplace



Source: Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025 | The Voice of Human Resources

HR Speaks: Level of Familiarity



Recovery Friendly Workplace Certification

For HR professionals who want to play a leadership role in combating SUD and encouraging recovery, there is much that you can do.

The [National Recovery Friendly Workplace Institute](#), run by the nonprofit Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation, offers certification for companies and nonprofits that want to better support employees who suffer from Substance Use Disorders.

A Recovery Friendly Workplace is one in which the employer and employees work together to create policies, practices, and a work environment that supports current and prospective employees who are in recovery. [National Recovery Friendly Workplace Certification](#) can be sought by organizations that have employees in multiple states and meet [national standards](#) in key areas such as

culture, hiring and retention, benefits, and education and awareness. (Organizations operating in a single state are encouraged to participate in their state's program.)

Since its rollout late in 2023, almost two dozen organizations have earned certification, including companies such as Oracle and the Gorilla Glue Company and nonprofits such as Associated Builders and Contractors. Some have just a handful of employees while others have as many as 85,000.

Cathie Hartnett, executive director of the Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation, said that certified companies are seeing improvements in productivity, morale, and employee satisfaction. Equally important, she said, is that certification is an achievable goal.

"Our certification isn't a nightmare," Hartnett said. "It doesn't take a team of 20 people working for six months. We are sort of the opposite of that. We want to normalize this as a standard health issue that you are dealing with, rather than having so many unique elements that it feels onerous."

HRCI was among the first organizations to participate in the certification program and held a webinar earlier this year to promote Recovery Friendly Workplaces.

"It was important to us to help lead the conversation on how employers can support recovery and reduce stigma. We feel that certification as a Recovery Friendly Workplace is a powerful step forward, and we wanted to lead by example."

Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI



HRCI leaders with Dr. Rahul Gupta, former director, and Peter Gaumond of the Office of National Drug Control Policy at the 2024 Recovery Ready Workplace event at the White House.



What's Happening at Work

Cathie Hartnett, executive director of the Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation, said that Substance Use Disorder can reverberate in the workplace in ways other health problems do not.

"If you think about a person who's struggling with Substance Use Disorder, there's probably two or three people immediately around them who are also affected by their condition, and those people are also in the workplace. So a Recovery Friendly Workplace is not just for the person with Substance Use Disorder, but it is also for the many family members or close friends who are struggling."

Cathie Hartnett | Executive Director of Global Recovery Initiatives Foundation

Hartnett said that attitudes about substance problems, and mental health in general, are changing, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic shed so much light on the issue.

"These have often been treated as though they were character flaws or choices that people made," she said. "One of the great things that has happened is that the stigma about mental health has really come down, and the stigma about Substance Use Disorder is also getting much better. The general population is much more empathetic."

Yet, even against this backdrop, many companies and nonprofits are still not well prepared for the challenges presented by Substance Use Disorder, according to the survey by HRCI and Fors Marsh. For example:

- More than half of HR professionals said they had not heard of Recovery Friendly Workplaces (33%) or knew little about them (25%). Only about one in 10 (11%) had specialized training.
- Only 13% said their organization had policies related to treatment and recovery. Only 3% offered treatment and recovery training for HR staff.
- Although 37% reported their organization's leadership was at least somewhat supportive of Recovery Friendly Workplace efforts; 19% said they were neutral; and 37% were unsure.
- The four biggest needs cited by HR professionals were training programs for employees and management (48%), training for HR professionals (45%), increased funding for these programs (33%), and comprehensive policy guidelines (30%).

"Overall, our study participants recognized the value of organizational support for individuals in recovery," the study said. "However, they also reported needs that are not currently met."

HR Speaks: Barriers to Implementing a Recovery Friendly Workplace

Barrier	%
Lack of knowledge	64
Misconceptions & stigma	59
Cost of implementation	42
Staffing	35
Limited financial resources	34
Insufficient training for HR & managers	34
Liabilities & risks	33
Legal requirements & compliance	29
Maintaining a drug-free workplace	25
Managing employees with SUD	23
Resistance to change	22
Maintaining employee confidentiality	22
Lack of educational resources	21
Lack of leadership support	20
Fear of negative reactions from employees	18
Integrating into existing policies	16

Impact on company culture	14
Possible decline in productivity & performance	12
Other	4

Source: Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025 | The Voice of Human Resources

When asked to name the barriers to becoming a Recovery Friendly Workplace, almost two thirds of respondents (64%) cited a lack of knowledge about Substance Use Disorder and recovery. More than half (50%) pointed to misconceptions and stigma. Rounding out the top five were concerns about implementation costs (42%), insufficient staffing (35%), and insufficient training for HR professionals and managers (34%). Concerns about liability, legal requirements and resistance to change were also cited, among many others.

“The biggest problems are not always related to resources. Often, they have to do with organizational culture. While it is true that budgets, staffing, and training are important, truly understanding the nature of Substance Use Disorder and recovery—and its impact on an organization—is vital to creating effective policies and programs.

Education is often the first step, and HR can plan a major role in bringing along management and leadership.”

Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI

The Prescription for Becoming Recovery Friendly

While there are many approaches to creating a Recovery Friendly Workplace, and cultures and programs can vary greatly from company to company, HR experts say successful programs often have several common components:

- **Training.** Programs for all employees that are designed to reduce stigma and enhance awareness can be extremely effective. Topics can include understanding Substance Use Disorder and recovery, recognizing the signs, legal and ethical considerations, intervention techniques, and communication skills. Training managers in the skills necessary to support and advocate for employees in recovery and providing HR staff with training to build systems, processes, and a supportive culture is also a major asset. Confidentiality training to protect employee privacy and encourage disclosure can also be helpful.
- **Executive and leadership support.** Efforts to increase resources and change culture require internal champions to get the greenlight. That means executive buy-in is critical to prioritize recovery initiatives, hire staff, and increase HR budgets. This often requires a sustained education effort and a solid business case that can clearly document the anticipated ROI.
- **Policies and procedures.** Policies and procedures should be trauma-informed, considering their potential impact on an individual's recovery. All should be communicated clearly, including those covering privacy protections, recovery benefits (for employees and family), and available resources to ensure employees feel confident they can access help without fear of discrimination or termination.

- **Budgeting and resources.** Successful programs allocate specific budgetary resources to support recovery initiatives and ensure they are adequately funded and sustainable. Advanced HR systems and wellness software are often a good investment in early years, ensuring the process of accessing support resources is simple.
- **Data collection.** One vital element that is often overlooked or relegated to an afterthought is collecting data to demonstrate the ROI of recovery initiatives and to influence decision-making. It is a good idea to use surveys, employee reviews, suggestion boxes, and other vehicles to seek regular employee feedback and continuously refine your programs.

Dufrane acknowledged that, in today's turbulent business environment, launching a Recovery Friendly Workplace initiative can be daunting. But the benefits to individual employees, collective morale and the bottom line can be worthwhile.

"Recovery support is an area where patience and persistence can really yield huge dividends. Take a step-by-step approach and build your case."

Be methodical, track your results, and collect anecdotes. Programs like these can change lives."

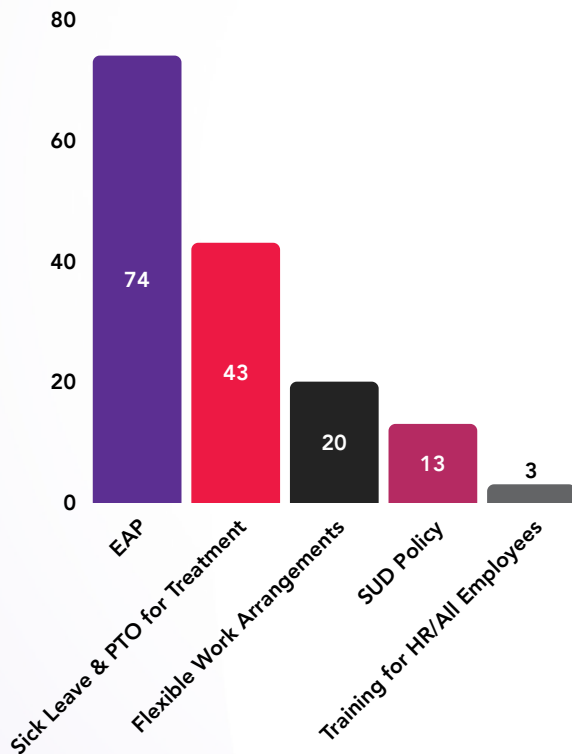
Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI

HR Speaks

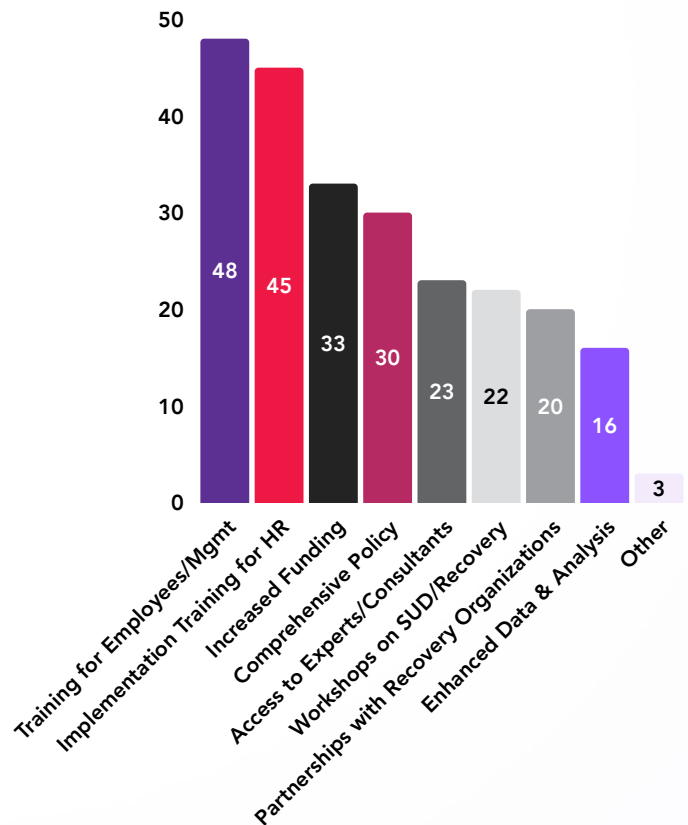
Source: Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025 |
The Voice of Human Resources



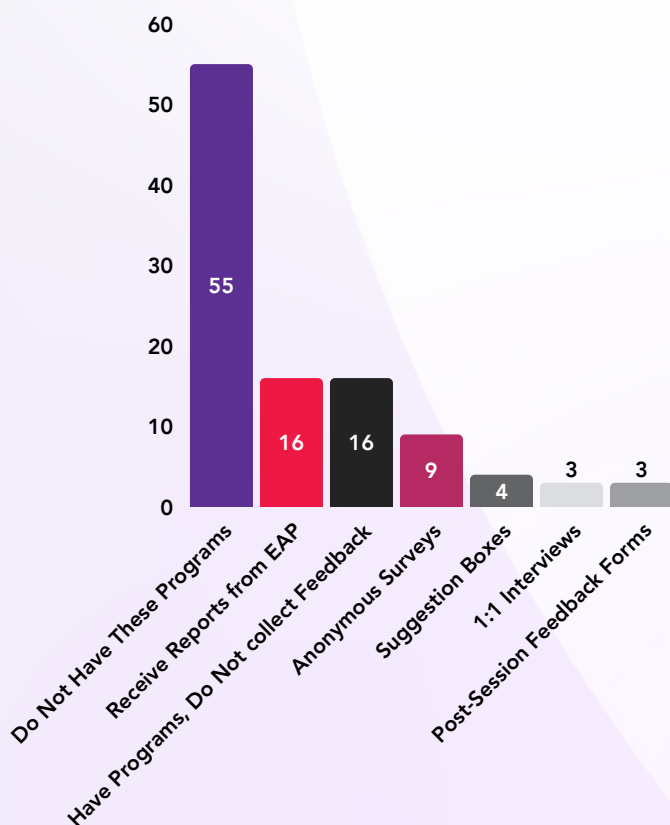
Policies and Practices Supporting Employees with SUD



Resources/Support Needed to Implement or Improve an RFW



Gathering Employee Feedback on SUD and Recovery Programs



HR Speaks

Source: Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025 |
The Voice of Human Resources



What Training Do HR Professionals Need to Grow and Support Recovery Friendly Workplaces?



Training Area	%
Recognizing signs of SUD	49
Understanding the impact of SUD	48
Legal & ethical considerations	47
Intervention techniques	46
Communication skills	44
Creating a supportive environment	39
Confidentiality & privacy	37
RFW policies & implementation	36
Crisis management	32
Measuring program effectiveness	30
Ongoing support & follow-up	29
Program maintenance	28
Providing caregiver support	27
EAPs	27
Resource allocation	26
Peer support programs	22
Other	2

Methodology

HRCI and Fors Marsh collaborated to create the Recovery Friendly Workplace Survey 2025. Fors Marsh used a mixed-methods approach, including information-gathering through a literature scan and in-depth interviews; quantitative data collection through an online survey; and qualitative data collection through focus groups. The survey was conducted August 12 to 23, 2024, and involved 1,536 HR professionals, all of whom were part of the HRCI community. The focus groups consisted of 23 subject matter experts identified by HRCI, representing organizations of different sizes.

Digging Deeper: America's Cannabis High

New Considerations for Cannabis and Work

A growing number of states have decriminalized medical and recreational cannabis, which provides a new policy challenge for companies and organizations. While cannabis is less likely to be lethal than opioids or alcohol, it still has important effects and consequences that employers should take into consideration.

Cannabis was first legalized in Washington state and Colorado in 2012. Thirteen years later, cannabis is legal in 24 states. This represents nearly half of U.S. states and 53% of the total population. However, the federal stance on cannabis has not changed; it remains illegal in federal jurisdictions. Thus, there is a regulatory patchwork of different rules in different places.

Regardless, cannabis usage is increasing. Almost half of America (47%) has tried cannabis, and one in six Americans now regularly use the substance. According to 2023 and 2024 [Gallup polling](#), this is more than double the percentage in 2013.

While the regulatory environment is murky, cultural norms may be even less clear. For example, most people understand that drinking alcohol and then driving or going to work is unsafe. However, many may think it is acceptable to do so while under the influence of cannabis, especially those who work remotely and are not part of an “office culture.” Sentiments that “cannabis usage is harmless” are also common. A 2024 [Gallup poll](#) showed that more than 40% said cannabis has a positive impact both on society and the people who use it.

Meanwhile, a [New York Times investigation](#) in 2024 found that, as usage grows, so do harmful effects. “The accumulating harm is broader and more severe than previously reported,” the article said.

“Gaps in state regulations, limited public health messaging and federal restraints on research have left many consumers, government officials and even medical practitioners in the dark about such outcomes.”

A [report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) last year shows that cannabis can have many harmful effects on the body, including slower reaction time and reduced coordination, higher blood pressure, and impacts on brain function that affect memory, learning, and attention span. Yet, despite the trend toward legalization, a [report by the University of California at San Francisco](#) this year said cannabis usage is “clouded by misperceptions.”

It is little wonder why people may be confused about the social uses of cannabis—a drug that was outlawed for decades—and how that applies to the workplace.

“Our country’s feelings about cannabis are not as evolved as they are about alcohol and narcotics, which may translate into uncertainty in the workplace. People may be unclear about what behavior is acceptable, and there will be grey areas. For example, it is acceptable at most office holiday parties to have a glass of wine. Would it be acceptable to use cannabis at that same event, assuming it is legal?”

Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI



Today's Cannabis Is Different

Nationwide, the cannabis industry is ever-changing. What was once an illegal enterprise is now big business—and it is growing quickly. The cannabis industry is now valued at roughly \$32 billion. The number of available products that include tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which gives cannabis its psychoactive properties, is also expanding to include vape, edibles, drinks, oils, and topicals.

The potency of today's cannabis has also increased. Cannabis samples seized by the Drug Enforcement Administration averaged about 4% THC in 1995, according to the National Institutes of Health. That increased to 16% by 2022.

A report by the American Psychological Association this year said some products now contain 30% and often higher concentrations of THC. As the report put it, "Today's cannabis industry is almost unrecognizable in comparison with the counterculture symbol of the 1960s and '70s."

[Click here to check out HRCI's](#)
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["Cannabis and the Workplace"](#)

Get in touch



1725 Duke Street, Suite 400 | Alexandria, VA 22314



+1-866-898-4724 (U.S. Toll-Free)



media@hrci.org



<https://www.hrci.org>

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