

# Systemic factors associated with opioid harms

Workers and supervisors need to ask tough questions about our workplace practices and health care system issues in order to create solutions that lead to better outcomes for those with opioid use disorder (OUD) and other substance use or mental health issues.

## Explain dangers

Employers must ask themselves why workers might be self-managing/medicating pain and addiction issues on their own rather than seeking early treatment options and accommodations at work. Some possible systemic factors to consider include:

- **Time off:** When someone has an addiction and requires time off work to seek recovery, this is not typically a WSIB-compensable claim and can be costly to the worker. It can be challenging to maintain consistent access to any harm reduction physician or clinic where a worker may need daily or weekly treatment.
- **Community treatment:** Many workers in the trades will not have adequate health care benefits, if any, available to them. These workers will need to rely on community-based services, which often have extensive wait times, if they are available at all. The majority of community-based programs take place during daytime hours. This can be challenging if a worker is trying to access service while maintaining a full-time job.
- **Rehabilitation:** Inpatient rehabilitation programs can be very expensive and are often not covered by workplace health care benefit plans. Plus, workers will usually not be paid for time off for rehab unless they qualify for short-term disability benefits, if available.
- **Travel/work location barriers:** Working away from home for extended periods can increase loneliness, destabilize social support networks, and exacerbate other mental health challenges. This can trigger a relapse for someone who is in early recovery from OUD. Work locations may be outside of the workers town of residence or far away from

their primary health care physician or harm reduction clinic. This could force employees to rely solely on walk-in clinics—if they have one in the area—or emergency rooms for treatment.

- **Workplace policy barriers:** Many workplaces lack a basic level of training on OUD and mental health for workers. This can make it difficult for people to know what they can expect from their employer if they do seek accommodations or request time off to attend regular treatment.

## Identify controls

- As employers and as individuals, we should strive to be compassionate and accommodating to those in most need of care.
- Ask questions and talk about the barriers to care with your workers.
- Encourage self-care and early help-seeking behaviours.

## Demonstrate

- Advocate for changes to your accommodation and mental health policies at work, if necessary.
- Understand your workers right to accommodation at work.
- Learn about how to accommodate someone with OUD in your workplace.
- Consider all barriers an individual with an OUD is facing and help build an individual accommodation plan that focuses on hope and recovery.
- Ensure all workers know where to find help with opioid use concerns in the community and within the workplace.