EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (EAPS)

WHAT IS AN EAP?

Employee assistance programs are company-sponsored programs designed to alleviate and, if possible, eliminate workplace problems caused by personal problems. Such programs typically offer supportive, diagnostic, and referral and treatment services. EAPs may be formal or informal in-house programs, or off-site efforts administered by outside consultants.

While some EAPs continue to focus exclusively on identifying and assisting workers who are alcoholics or drug abusers, most now offer a wide range of other services to help employees resolve their personal and work-related problems. These "broad brush" services include on-site, vendor-site, and telephone counseling and referral for psychological symptoms or mental health disorder (stress, anxiety, depression, phobias), marital or family-related difficulties (child care, elder care), legal and financial concerns, catastrophic medical problems (AIDS, cancer), eating disorders (bulimia, anorexia), preretirement needs, and career-related difficulties.

WHY SHOULD I IMPLEMENT AN EAP?

EAPs generally are implemented as a:

Management tool. When normal management techniques and strategies, such as constructive confrontation, fail to bring about desired improvements in job performance, or when job-related causes seem insufficient to explain poor, atypical performance, supervisors can turn to EAPs for advice on how to handle a troubled worker. By increasing managers' awareness of the impact of personal problems on job performance, EAPs discourage supervisors from diagnosing problems, lessen the chances of any negative impact on workers' future promotions or job security, and ensure that managers better use their skills to help employees work well.

Company-provided benefit. Counseling services are an accepted part of employee benefits packages. Employers offering EAPs demonstrate their commitment to employees, thereby improving workforce morale.

Mechanism for controlling health care costs. Concern about wrong benefits claims and rising health care costs has prompted many employers to implement EAPS; the programs have proven to be beneficial in reducing inappropriate use of health benefits through substitution of quality, low-cost, short-term services for expensive, extended medical treatment.

HOW DOES AN EAP WORK?

EAPs are designed to facilitate the early intervention in and treatment of employees' problems before those problems begin affecting job performance or necessitate costly hospitalization. In some cases, the use of an EAP can make the difference between keeping a job and being terminated. Workers can enter the employee assistance referral process in a number of ways. In addition to referral by a co-worker or family member, EAPs accept:

Supervisory referrals, which are made when a manager detects and documents a performance problem, approaches the employee and learns that the problem is not solely job-related, and recommends or requires that the employee seek help through the EAP; and
Self-referrals, which are made when employees themselves recognize they have a personal problem and confidentially contact the EAP for assistance before the problem begins affecting job performance.

WHAT COSTS ARE INVOLVED?

Employee assistance programs usually cost between $15 and $45 per employee per year. Costs are calculated per capita, not per fee for service. Program expenses vary from company to company. Exact figures depend on such factors as company location, employees, educational needs, workforce size or number or employees covered, frequency of problems and of program use, amount of staff training required, and employee time away from work for counseling.

WHAT BENEFITS CAN I DERIVE FROM AN EAP?

Counseling and assistance programs appear to have a number of positive effects. Not only can they help employees keep their jobs, they also can help improve morale and communication, reduce absenteeism and turnover, prevent accidents on the job, reduce health costs to employers, and prevent or eliminate employee-management problems.

WHAT DO I NEED TO CONSIDER?

Following are some questions that should be considered in planning, implementing, and administering an EAP:

- What is your motivation for implementing an EAP?
  - Is it to help employees with personal problems, improve morale, and lower benefits costs?
  - Or, is it solely a response to a crisis?

- Have you identified personnel and health care problems in your company to determine the need for and employee receptiveness to an EAP?
  - Have you identified possible barriers to the success of the EAP?
  - Do you prefer an in-house or an off-site program?
  - If you desire to establish an in-house program, are sufficient staff available to provide the necessary counseling or referral services?
  - What additional staff training is required?
  - If your resources are limited and you decide to contract with an outside firm to administer the EAP, have you examined the vendor's track record (financial stability, management and service capabilities); program design; staff credentials and expertise; and program costs?
  - Do you know if the vendor has any financial incentive to refer employees to its own programs for therapy?
  - Is the contractor convenient and accessible for employees?
  - Does it have an established network of community contacts?
  - Have you appointed someone within the company to represent your needs and interests to the EAP provider?

- What services do you intend to offer?
  - How might existing health insurance coverage affect the provision of these proposed services?
  - Will there by adequate follow-through on recommendations for treatment?
- How will referral be made?
  - Will peer referral be available?

- How accessible will the program be to employees and members of employees' families?
  - Will counselors be available to take calls 24 hours a day?
  - Will there be a crisis "hotline"?
  - Will it be possible for employees to schedule counseling sessions both during and after work hours?

- Is employee confidentiality protected?

- Have managers and supervisors been trained to detect and document problems and make referrals?
  - Do they know when and how to intervene?
  - Is the EAP actively involved in the supervisory training and education effort?
  - Is follow-up training provided?

- Have you prepared a written policy statement to communicate the basics of your program to supervisors and employees?
  - Have you specified in writing the procedures to the EAP provider?

- How are workers informed about current or new program services?
  - Do you conduct lectures for, or group meetings with employees, show films, disseminate program brochures and memoranda, post posters, add inserts to payroll envelopes, and include articles in employee publications?

- How are program use and effectiveness monitored?
  - How often are evaluations made of services and outreach activities?
  - Are employee attitude surveys used to determine the appropriateness and efficiency of services?