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Community effort needed to combat substance abuse

Substance abuse as an economic development problem?

Yes. Talk to Sheridan County employers who are seeing the effects of substance abuse among their workers.

An estimated 14.8 million Americans are current illicit drug users with approximately 9.4 million of these individuals employed.

One of the persistent myths in Wyoming is that substance abuse is an "individual" problem. That's especially true when the substance being abused is alcohol.

We see the problems resulting from meth, cocaine and other "hard" drugs, but alcohol (and, to a lesser extent, marijuana) is still underplayed as a serious source of abuse.

Yet in a 2003 survey, 25 percent of Wyomingites reported binge alcohol use, and more than 9 percent of the total population showed alcohol dependence or abuse in the past year.

The situation hasn't improved. Abuse of alcohol and other substances continues to be a growing problem throughout the state.

Substance abuse affects safety. An employee operating equipment while

under the influence is an unsafe employee — to himself as well as, potentially, to others.

An employee under the influence is less productive on the job than others — assuming he is able to come to work at all. Chalk up both lack of productivity and loss of that individual from the workplace to substance abuse.

Drug abusers require more health care. Add dollars to the employer's cost for providing insurance.

Annually substance abuse drains more than \$100 billion from American businesses.

And add loss of inventory to the tally. A serious substance abuser may resort to stealing to get the money needed to support his habit.

Additionally, the work of a substance abuser's spouse may also be affected, as the spouse must take time off from a job or is simply unable to focus on his or her own work.

A Community Affair

Pamela
Peldo

Planning for Sheridan's economic development



Yet while many Sheridan County employers are aware that a problem exists here, there are employers who are either unaware of the problem, or they try to ignore it.

During a time when many jobs in Sheridan County

are going unfilled because of a lack of workers, some employers will accept a worker who is a substance abuser in preference to no worker at all.

Combating the problem requires a change in the way substance abuse is perceived. Substance abuse must be seen as what it is: a detriment to individuals, families and businesses.

Forward Sheridan's Economic Development Strategic Planning Task Force and the Sheridan County Chamber of Commerce have established a committee to look at the problem and develop a concrete plan to deal with the issue.

Goals are to create a voluntary imple-

mentation of drug policies and drug-testing programs in the Sheridan area and to provide educational programs to employers.

The committee is working on such issues as criteria for what constitutes a "drug-free workplace" as well as a way to accurately measure success.

It is the goal of the Drug Free Workplace Initiative to create a culture in Sheridan County where anything but a drug-free workplace is unacceptable.

Such an initiative requires a community effort — our safety depends on it!

Pamela Peldo is executive director of WYSTAR (Wyoming Substance Abuse Treatment and Recovery Center). She also serves as chairwoman of the Chamber of Commerce's Drug Free Workplace Initiative.

"A Community Affair" is a weekly column from citizens who support Forward Sheridan, a professional business organization of invested partners whose purpose is to develop and maintain a sound economy in Sheridan County. Philippe Chino is president/CEO of Forward Sheridan.