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# Business

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## In Hawai'i, employers try supportive approach

By Dan Nakaso  
Advertiser Staff Writer

Vincent Aquino got hired as a roofer and quickly fell in with co-workers who drank beer and smoked marijuana on the job and offered Aquino his first hit of "ice," or crystal methamphetamine.

Over the hazy months that followed, Aquino saw a co-worker high on drugs walk backward off a roof. Once, after staying up all night smoking ice with his fellow roofers, Aquino woke up and was startled to find himself on top of a three-story home overlooking a cliff.

"The roofing company was like a big party; everybody was high all of the time," Aquino said. "We spent days doing drugs and I just wouldn't show up at work. There was one time when I don't remember going to sleep for five days. When I did go to work, somebody would try to tell me something and I would get violent and angry."

Aquino, 40, eventually sought treatment, has been drug free for years and is now studying at Maui Community College.

He is part of the nearly 10 percent of Hawai'i workers estimated to struggle with alcohol and drug abuse. It's a problem that costs employers lost productivity in the form of tardiness, absenteeism and poor performance, and leads to theft of property — often used as barter for drugs — increased workplace injuries and higher workers' comp and insurance costs.

Eventually, all consumers pay the price of Hawai'i's substance abuse.

"We've got to take some bold steps," said Lt. Gov. James "Duke" Aiona, who has taken the lead on drug-related initiatives for Gov. Linda Lingle's administration. "Employees are getting high on the job or chronically

Alcohol, nicotine major players

Alcohol and nicotine are the most prevalent forms of substance abuse but usually are overlooked because they are legal, said Carey Brown, general partner of Employee Assistance of the Pacific.

"Those two drugs are associated with other drug use, not surprisingly," Brown said. "The relationship between alcohol, nicotine and other substances is frequently missed. But in terms of cost to employers, alcohol and nicotine would be the two big ones."

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calling in sick. Fellow workers are getting fed up because they're saying, 'Hey, my safety's in jeopardy. My job's in jeopardy because of a co-worker who's high on the job.' Likewise, employers are afraid that they're businesses might go down."

No employer welcomes substance abuse problems, and with unemployment at less than 3 percent in Hawai'i, it's getting harder to find "clean" workers. Increasingly, employers are trying to help workers overcome their problems rather than force them out.

- On Honolulu's waterfront, the gateway to nearly all goods consumed in Hawai'i, four maritime companies and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union struggled for years to find consensus on the best way to address substance abuse. This month both sides launched a new approach that promises treatment for workers rather than discipline.
- In Hana, on Maui, the Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees, Local 5, and the Hotel Hana Maui management are trying to get help for the extended families of hotel workers because both sides believe that problems in the community are intertwined with the hotel.
- And in Aliamanu, a small-business owner and recovering drug addict has taken a no-nonsense approach to substance abuse — but also has opened up his home to employees.

It's not clear exactly how much substance abuse costs Hawai'i's \$50 billion-a-year economy.

### **Staggering losses**

Nationally, a 2001 study by the Office of National Drug Control Policy estimated that the cost of drug abuse increased 5.9 percent annually between 1992 and 1998 — from \$102.2 billion to \$143.4 billion. Lost productivity made up the overwhelming share of the losses — 69 percent.

A 1992 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institutes of Health found that alcohol and drug abuse together amounted to an annual U.S. economic cost of \$246 billion. Alcohol abuse was responsible for 60 percent of the cost, or about \$148 billion, according to the study.

In January 2004 the parent company of Zippy's, Waipio-based FCH Enterprises Inc., began unannounced urine tests for employees and said in a statement at the time that "illegal drug use and alcohol misuse cost Hawai'i businesses millions of dollars each year in accidents and injuries, lost work time and lowered productivity, medical and legal costs and theft."

No one has taken a comprehensive look at the true costs in Hawai'i, but the Lingle administration may consider commissioning a study, Aiona said.

"We really don't have good data," Aiona said. "The problem is not so gloomy that it seems to be hindering every industry out there, but it does seem to be much more prevalent than it was 20 years ago."

A 1998 study by the state Department of Health's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division found that 9.26 percent of people in Hawai'i 18 and over — 82,880 people — needed treatment for alcohol and drugs.

In 2000, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse found that 8.1 percent of full-time workers ages 18 to 49 reported heavy alcohol use in

the past month. And 7.8 percent reported illicit drug use in the past month.

In the year before, according to the survey, 7.4 percent of workers ages 18 to 49 were dependent on or abusing alcohol, and 1.9 percent were dependent on or abusing illicit drugs.

### **No honor, no dignity**

Despite efforts to identify, punish or seek treatment for workers abusing drugs or alcohol, several addicts told The Advertiser that they simply moved to another job whenever bosses and co-workers grew weary of their chronic absenteeism, deteriorating work habits and outright theft.

Leon, 53, is in recovery for alcohol and drug abuse and asked that his last name not be used because he now runs his own business. When he was 48 years old, Leon lost his job at a Honolulu real estate development company just 18 months after trying ice for the first time.

"Pretty quick, I was using 24/7," Leon said. "If I didn't have any ice, I was all about trying to get it. If I was at work, all I could think about was where I was going to get some more. ... I started making horrendous mistakes that cost the company plenty of money. If I could scam some sort of way to get money out of the company, that's mine. I had no morals, I had no honor and I had no dignity."

Looking back at his performance as an employee, Leon said, "I'd be gone for days. And if I showed up for work I'd leave at 11 o'clock to go drink and get some drugs."

When applied properly, the workplace can be a powerful motivator for employees to seek treatment, said Carey Brown, general partner of Employee Assistance of the Pacific, which works with 98 Island companies.

"Hawai'i is unique because the connectiveness of all of us is more evident in the Islands, where the workplace kind of replicates the family in terms of hierarchy," Brown said. "We often think of employers as our parents and employers often treat employees as children."

"People do need a paycheck. Most of us are pretty attached to that," Brown said. "But (pointing out a substance abuse problem) doesn't have to be shaming or negative or punitive. The workplace therefore becomes this really important opportunity to affect some kind of change."

For years, the ILWU and four maritime companies made little progress in finding ways to clamp down on drug use on the waterfront. Like other Hawai'i unions, the ILWU has long opposed unannounced drug tests, saying they can become a management tool to target and harass employees and that positive tests can be used to discipline and punish workers.

But filmmaker Edgy Lee — the producer of Hawai'i's "Ice" documentaries — became a catalyst for a solution on the docks. She encouraged both sides to work together on a new, collaborative approach to emphasize treatment over discipline in dealing with drug- and alcohol-addicted workers.

Management and labor agreed that anyone who comes forward will not be punished and instead will receive substance abuse treatment.

"The attitude on both sides was relief — 'It's about time,' " said Nate

Lum, chairman of the Hawai'i longshore division of the ILWU. "A few years ago, I couldn't have gotten this past the members. But the guys are tired of seeing their co-workers like that."

### **Common ground**

After launching the program on Hawai'i's waterfront, the ILWU hopes to push for similar arrangements with its members in the pineapple, sugar and hotel industries.

"A lot of us are desperate to get help for the employees," Lum said. "We want these guys to get help so they can get on with their lives in a positive way. That's the main thing."

Lum knows that encouraging union members to acknowledge and seek help for their substance abuse problems comes at personal, political risk for him.

But Lum has seen the lives of too many friends and relatives ruined by drugs, especially ice. He also has a 21-year-old son working on the waterfront and two young daughters.

"I know that some, a minority, might think this is a trick, a ploy" to get them identified and disciplined, Lum said. "But I'm giving them my word. I'm sticking my neck out. ... We have to find common ground. Our own people are hitting rock bottom."

Any employee absence, drug-related or not, hurts employers such as Tim Guard.

"There are critical moments when everybody is needed," said Guard, president of McCabe Hamilton & Renny, which provides stevedores and maritime services for businesses at Honolulu Harbor and is working with the ILWU. "Just one missing person, for whatever reason, can cause us some stress."

Guard has high hopes for the new approach on the docks.

"I'm very optimistic that the direction we're taking will result in a number of our people regaining control of their lives," he said.

The strong bonds among Hawai'i co-workers — some tracing their friendships to childhood — can work against efforts to get employees into treatment programs, said Uwe Gunnensen, director of the assistance and recovery program for the Operating Engineers, Local 3, which has 2,800 members who operate cranes, bulldozers, graders and other earth-moving equipment in Hawai'i.

Gunnensen is based in California and represents operating engineers in Nevada, Utah, California and Hawai'i. To him, employee attitudes in the Islands are unlike any other he's seen on the Mainland.

"There is much more camaraderie among people working together in Hawai'i than on the Mainland," Gunnensen said. "They all grew up together and some of the so-called newcomers have been there 20 years. They all know their kids. They play games together, they go surfing together, they go fishing together. They're more apt to take care of each other and help each other out. That prevails in the workplace and it could be detrimental to getting treatment because they tend to protect co-workers."

Long-held Island attitudes toward drinking and some illicit drugs —

especially pakalolo — add another barrier to treatment, Gunnersen said.

"They all know who has been using and for how long and it's generally accepted," Gunnersen said. "A little bit of ice, a little bit of pakalolo — it's no big deal. When I ask them how much they drink, they say, 'Oh, not very much — 10, 12 bottles of beer a day.' I say, 'Do you drink at work?' 'No, only at lunch and on coffee breaks.' I guess it's a cultural thing."

But co-workers, especially the ones working around equipment and heavy machinery, do reach a threshold when drugs such as ice create safety problems, Gunnersen said.

Even then, co-workers step in like family.

"They'll put an arm around the shoulder, like talking to a cousin. 'You can't do that. Your kids will suffer and you can get hurt,' " Gunnersen said. "They even pick up his workload. They don't tell me that they resent him. I've watched them and I don't see it."

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