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## **Dozens who failed surprise drug tests were fired, but RV plant keeps rolling**

Kathy Gurchiek

When employees flunk the drug test administered by a northern Indiana manufacturing company, they're out the door. In a move leaving no doubt about its policy on illegal drug use, Keystone RV Co. in Goshen shut down production at one of its plants for a day in April to drug-screen employees after reports of drug use on the premises.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The result: termination of one-fourth of that plant's workers after they tested positive for methamphetamine, marijuana, cocaine or other drugs. That included six employees who resigned rather than undergo mandatory screening.

Despite the immediate loss of 34 of 120 mostly line workers, a contingency plan drawn up the day before the screening had the recreational vehicle manufacturer back in business the next day with 30 temporary workers pulled from 11 of its 14 plants, said Keystone's HR manager, Ken Julian.

It also didn't hurt that Keystone, which typically receives 50 to 70 job applications daily, heard from approximately 2,000 job seekers in the two weeks after word of the firings got out in that heavily industrial area.

Two days after the screening, new hires were on the job.

Drug use costs U.S. employers between \$75 billion and \$100 billion per year, according to U.S. Department of Labor figures cited in a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) July 2004 white paper.

Substance abusers are 3.6 times more likely to be involved in on-the-job accidents than others, five times more likely to injure themselves or another in the process, five times more likely to file a workers' compensation claim, 10 times more likely to miss work and 33 percent less productive. They run up health care costs that are three times as high as for non-substance abusers, according to the American Council for Drug Education.

Although most private companies are not required to test for illegal drug use, Keystone's actions put it among the approximately 50 percent of U.S. companies that screen current employees and the 61 percent that screen job candidates, according to American Management Association figures cited in the SHRM paper.

Keystone's drug screening was prompted by reports from police and other sources that employees at one of its plants were using drugs during breaks and at lunch. The philosophy of Keystone's operation manager, Julian noted, is to deal with the problem immediately even if it means a temporary shutdown. In the past, Keystone has called on local law enforcement to conduct plant or parking lot sweeps with K-9 units to check for drugs, he added.

For Keystone, drug use is a safety issue, Julian said. Most of the employees of the nine-year-old company, a subsidiary of Thor Industries in Ohio, work off scaffolds and around power tools to manufacture its 14 brands of travel trailers and fifth wheels.

"There's a lot of opportunity for somebody to get injured," he said.

Although it was the company's first plantwide drug test, the company conducts pre-employment drug screenings and tests for drug use after a job-related accident or injury.

Those are among the usual scenarios for employer-conducted drug tests, the SHRM paper reported. With the exception of industries regulated by the U.S. Department of Transportation that are required to test workers for illegal drugs, the SHRM paper noted, typical instances include:

- \* Pre-employment tests. Performed after making a contingent offer of employment.
- \* Baseline tests. Establishes the level of drug use when a program is being implemented and "cleans house."
- \* Random tests. A certain portion of the workforce is selected randomly at established intervals, such as quarterly or annually.
- \* Post-accident tests. Positive results following a workplace-related accident or injury could mean that an employee is ineligible for compensation and medical benefits.
- \* Scheduled tests. Some employers offer "last chance" agreements to workers who test positive with the provision that they submit to regular, continuing testing.
- \* Reasonable suspicion. Based on "suspicious behaviors such as poor job performance, tardiness, smelling of marijuana or other substances, or reports from witnesses that an employee is using drugs," the employer has reason to believe an employee is under the influence of drugs.

However, some companies do not conduct drug screenings because of concerns over invasion of employee privacy, including collecting specimens of bodily fluid, the SHRM paper reported.

The cost involved also can be a deterrent to employers. Costs may increase depending on the technology used, the substances tested for and the company's location, according to the SHRM paper.

Keystone's costs included one day's paid leave to workers testing negative; the cost of new hires at about \$300 to \$400 per person; and nearly \$4,000 for the plantwide screening and retesting conducted by the vendor used for its pre-employment and post-accident screenings. Retesting is important; four Keystone employees initially tested positive until a second test found those results attributable to their use of over-the-counter ephedrine-based products.

While the company was disappointed at the high number of employees who tested positive, Julian said, it has no regrets about proceeding with the drug screening, despite the expense.

\$400

THE TOP PRICE KEYSTONE RV CO. HAD TO PAY PER EACH NEW HIRE TO REPLACE WORKERS FIRED FOR TESTING POSITIVE FOR DRUGUSE.

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