

**Recovery Friendly Workplace Peer Learning Series Final
Report**

June 2023

Executive Summary

The Center for Health, Work, and Environment (CHWE) at the Colorado School of Public Health partnered with the University of Colorado (CU) Johnson Depression Center and the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention to further address the national mental health crisis and substance use epidemic. With funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the team developed and launched the **Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW) initiative** to work with partners and employees to educate, train, and provide resources to managers to support employees in treatment and recovery from substances.

The RFW initiative helps address major mental health problems facing workforces and communities including depression, suicide, and substance use disorders. Over the past 18 months, we conducted statewide outreach, convened and educated business leaders, shared evidence-based tools, and provided technical assistance to increase awareness and assist in implementing best practices in Colorado workplaces.

The project focused on convening business representatives to provide access to education and services in high-risk industries including the construction, hospitality, and restaurant industries across urban and rural areas of Colorado. Overall, the project had impact in reaching and engaging employers in addressing behavioral health challenges that individual employees are facing, including substance use and addiction. This report summarizes the impact the project has had in delivery of the Workplace Mental Health Module, the hosting of the RFW Peer Learning Series, and the ongoing employer outreach through the establishment of a new workgroup and hosting of community events.

Overview of Evaluation Findings

The RFW Peer Learning Series consisted of four sessions held between September 2022 and January 2023. There were 54 registered participants, and 41 participated in the RFW Peer Learning Series, representing 37 organizations. In addition to participation in the Peer Learning Series, 19 organizations completed the Health Links[®] Mental Health Module and 23 RFW-specific advising sessions were held across 20 organizations.

Overall, we found high satisfaction with the series, with participants strongly agreeing that they would recommend the series to others (average rating was 4.46 out of 5.00). Prior to participating in the series, most respondents to the pre-survey questions agreed that they were knowledgeable about how mental health relates to the workplace, that they were active mental health advocates in the workplace, and that they were comfortable addressing mental health concerns in the workplace. All of these scores increased on the post-survey. The largest increase was to the question related to confidence addressing substance use and recovery-related concerns in the workplace (3.61 pre to 4.41 post), demonstrating the series was successful in giving participants skills to take to their workplace.

After the RFW Peer Learning Series, respondents indicated they needed to take the following actions to move towards a RFW: offer education and training (59%); gain leadership support (59%); assess organizational readiness (59%); coordinating with human resources (46%); assess individual needs (40,9%); and implement new services and programs (41%).

The most frequent topics discussed during advising sessions included: 1) reviewing policies (39%); 2) planning recovery friendly work events (30%); 3t) completing the Health Links Mental Health Module baseline survey (26%); 3t) providing employee education or training (26%); and 5) conducting an employee survey to learn more about coping (17%).

The report below provides more detail about the evaluation of the RFW Peer Learning Series.

Workplace Mental Health Module

We conducted outreach to employers to offer the Workplace Mental Health Module as a resource for assessing current policies and practices for supporting employee mental health and well-being. The module includes an online organizational survey, training, and virtual advising to help organizations evaluate and enhance evidence-based workplace strategies to address worker mental health including depression, anxiety, and substance use. The 18-item organizational survey scores businesses in 4 domains (benchmarks): Workplace Culture; Employee Benefits; Education and Training; and Equity and Accessibility.

Between January 2022 to June 2023, we had 19 organizations complete the Mental Health survey. Participating organizations represent 23,057 working adults in the following industries: health care and social assistance, accommodation and food service, finance and insurance, transportation, warehousing and utilities, public administration, and mining, construction, and oil and gas extraction.

Major themes include: 1) high employer motivation for supporting and enhancing workplace mental health policies and practices; 2) focusing on mental health in order to reduce employee stress; 3) increasing engagement; and 4) improving moral. These findings suggest that organizations are prioritizing workplace mental health as a retention tool to support the well-being of current employees, not necessarily to attract new talent. While most survey respondents indicated that they offer employee assistance programs (EAPs), one-on-one advising sessions with employers showed that these programs are underutilized by workers due to the limited effectiveness of communication strategies. Based on our findings, the greatest opportunities for workplace improvements are in education and training, specifically manager and supervisor specific training on mental health crisis management and understanding mental health benefits, policies, and guidelines.

Peer Learning Series Overview

The Center for Health, Work, and Environment (CHWE) at the Colorado School of Public Health partnered with the University of Colorado (CU) Johnson Depression Center and the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention to further address the national mental health crisis and substance use epidemic. The Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW) project aims to work with partners and employees to educate, train, and provide resources to managers to support employees in treatment and recovery from substances. The RFW Peer Learning Series was developed in 2022 with the goal of bringing together Colorado executives, management, leadership, HR directors, and decision-makers to learn more about turning their organizations into RFWs. The series consisted of expert speakers, case studies, and peer discussions around RFWs and mental health in the workplace. Featured speakers came from behavioral health, public health, the legal field, as well as representatives from business owners who are implementing RFWs and people with lived experiences.

Four sessions were held between September 2022 and January 2023.

Session 1 – *People, Work and Health: What Employers Need to Know* examined the fundamentals of behavioral health, including mental health conditions, substance use, and suicide prevention, as well as discussed the roles of employers and employees in addressing substance use and building a recovery friendly workplace.

Session 2 – *Establishing a Recovery Friendly Workplace* covered the different roles and responsibilities of leadership, human resources, and legal professionals in addressing behavioral health in the workplace. This session also covered how to create an inclusive and stigma free workplace, as well as how to implement policies and practices that align with RFW values.

Session 3 – *Recovery Friendly Workplace: Cornerstone Practices* delved into common workplace stressors and their impact on employees, prevention strategies, coping techniques, and evidence-based behavioral health services including employee assistance programs (EAP) and peer support programs.

Session 4 – *Next Steps: Colorado's Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative* explored legal implications of implementing a RFW, learning more about a person's lived experience and the role that work played, and highlighted next steps for RFW in Colorado and continued involvement.

Evaluation

An evaluation plan was developed for the RFW project that included tracking participation in the four-part learning series, completion of the Health Links Mental Health Module, and participation in Health Links advising. We developed pre/post surveys that assessed satisfaction with the series, personal knowledge about and confidence in addressing substance use and recovery-related concerns in the workplace, and planned actions as a result of participation. Three months after the completion of the full series, we sent a follow-up survey to participants to learn what they had done as a result of participating and what they still planned to do.

We also tracked completion of the Health Links Mental Health Module and participation in advising sessions specific to the RFW content. A qualitative analysis of those sessions examined organizational priorities, topics addressed during the session, and benefits to the organization if they became a RFW.

Recovery Friendly Workplace Peer Learning Series Feedback

There were 54 registered participants, and 41 people who ultimately participated in the RFW Peer Learning Series. The most common organizational role was human resources or other benefits professional (39%) and well-being specialist (26%). The average number of employees from participating organizations was 1,750, with a range of 3 to over 10,000. Participants represented a range of industries including accommodation and food service, healthcare and social assistance, public administration, local government, education, construction, mental health services, academia and public health.

Attendance varied by session: session one (n=39), session two (n=30), session three (n=24), and session four (n=26). Attendees participated in a pre-survey (n=31) and post-survey (n=22) about

the RFW Peer Learning Series. Prior to participating, respondents hoped that the RFW Peer Learning Series would help give them the knowledge to support employees in recovery, information about how to educate leaders on RFW, and direction on how to take action. For example, one respondent said they hoped to gain “a greater understanding of the issues of recovery in the workplace, how organizations can support recovery, and resources to put in place.”

Both pre and post-surveys assessed the level of agreement with statements about their role in the organization’s workplace mental health and RFW. In the pre-survey, respondents agreed they knew how to support workplace mental health in their organization (scores ranged from 4.00 to 4.26). However, respondents were more neutral about their confidence in addressing substance use and recovery-related concerns (M=3.61). From the post-survey, respondents indicated higher levels of agreement that they knew how to support workplace mental health. Specifically, respondents agreed more strongly about how confident they were in addressing substance use and recovery-related concerns (M=4.4). See Table 1.

In the pre-survey, respondents disagreed that workplaces do not benefit from providing support or resources to people that are in recovery from substances (M=1.5). Respondents also disagreed with the statement that workers should be terminated when substance use impacts their work (M=2.06) and that only leaders (M=1.52) or supervisors and managers (M=1.61) should be promoting a recovery-friendly workplace. In the post-survey, respondents' scores shifted to stronger levels of disagreement, indicating their better understanding of the benefits of a RFW.

After the RFW Peer Learning Series, respondents indicated they needed to take the following actions to move towards a RFW: offer education and training (59%); gain leadership support (59%); assess organizational readiness (59%); coordinating with human resources (46%); assess individual needs (40,9%); and implement new services and programs (41%). Prior to the training, every action listed had 74%-90% of respondents indicating they would make this change. This shift post-training demonstrated that respondents perhaps had a clearer picture of specific actions to take, as opposed to doing everything.

Table 1. Workplace Mental Health				
Statement	Pre (n=31)		Post (n=22)	
	Overall Mean	SD	Overall Mean	SD
I am knowledgeable about how mental health relates to the workplace.	4.19	0.53	4.64	0.48
I am an active mental health advocate in the workplace.	4.26	0.62	4.23	0.67
I feel comfortable addressing mental health concerns in the workplace.	4.13	0.83	4.41	0.58
The workplace plays a role in substance use recovery.	4.00	0.72	4.45	0.50
I am comfortable discussing how workplace benefits and services may support substance use recovery.	4.00	0.92	4.27	0.69
I feel confident addressing substance use and recovery related concerns in the workplace.	3.61	1.07	4.41	0.49
Note: These questions were asked on a five-point likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree				

Table 2. Recovery Friendly Workplace				
Statement	Pre (n=31)		Post (n=22)	
	Overall Mean	SD	Overall Mean	SD
The workplace does not benefit from providing support or resources to workers recovery bring from substance use.	1.48	0.62	1.45	0.89
A recovery friendly workplace shifts the responsibility of recovering from the employee to the workplace.	2.61	0.90	1.91	0.73
A recovery friendly workplace eliminates consequences for substance use at work.	2.00	0.84	1.27	0.45
Official workplace policies have little impact on recovering from substance use.	2.52	0.76	1.77	0.67
Only organizational leadership needs to know what being a recovery friendly workplace entails.	1.52	0.92	1.09	0.29
Only direct supervisors and managers need to promote being a recovery friendly workplace.	1.61	0.90	1.41	0.49
Workers with a background of substance abuse should not be allowed in the workplace.	1.26	0.76	1.09	0.29
A worker should be immediately terminated if substance use that impacts work is discovered.	2.06	0.84	1.77	0.85
Note: These questions were asked on a five-point likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree				

Participants in the RFW Peer Learning Series received a follow-up survey approximately three months after the conclusion of the training. The response rate was low (n=9). However, the feedback received indicated that respondents were implementing changes to their workplaces, such as talking with leadership and sharing information with co-workers. Table 3 presents what respondents are currently doing (or have completed), plan to do, or do not plan to do.

Table 3. Since participating in the RFW Peer Learning Series, what actions have you taken (or do you plan to take) to support employees in recovery?

Statement	Doing or Done		Plan to do		Don't Plan to Address	
	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Accessed/used the RFW Toolkit	67%	6	33%	3	0%	0
Talked with leadership	89%	8	11%	1	0%	0
Shared information with coworkers	78%	7	22%	2	0%	0
Offered employee training on the topic of substance use	44%	4	33%	3	22%	2
Enacted/Edited drug-free workplace policies	11%	1	56%	5	33%	3
Added new employee benefits	22%	2	11%	1	67%	6
Leveraged employee assistance programs	33%	3	56%	5	11%	1
Joined the RFW Employer Workgroup	67%	6	22%	2	11%	1

Health Links RFW Advising

Between September 2022 and May 2023, 23 RFW-specific advising sessions were held with 20 unique organizations (three organizations each had two sessions). Each advising session lasted 30 minutes. The motivation for attending RFW advising stemmed from: 1) participation in the RFW series for organizations; 2) their desire to increase their knowledge of mental health culture, substance use disorders, and RFWs; 3) wanting to support current employees who are in recovery; 4) a desire to be a leader in the area of RFWs; and 5) needing to develop and review specific RFW-related policies.

The top three organizational priorities at the time of advising were: 1) overall employee mental well-being (91%); 2) health and well-being supports for employees in recovery (52%); and 3) becoming a RFW (39%). A few companies stated that substance misuse and mental health concerns are prevalent in their specific industries, such as “substance use & suicide is prevalent in construction” and “substance use is very normalized in this organization [restaurant industry], it's part of working here.” The prevalences, statistics, and personal history mentioned by companies were catalysts for organizations seeking a RFW advising session.

The most frequent topics discussed during advising sessions included: 1) reviewing policies (39%); 2) planning recovery friendly work events (30%); 3) completing the Health Links Mental Health Module baseline survey (26%); 4) providing employee education or training (26%); and 5) conducting an employee survey to learn more about coping (17%).

Employer Events

Our outreach and engagement activities involved partnering with chambers of commerce, community groups, non-profits, advocates, stakeholders, and local governments to convene and

build capacity for empowering employers and individuals in supporting employees in treatment and recovery in workplaces.

On June 8, 2023, we co-hosted an event on the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (AMC) in partnership with the Colorado Attorney General's Office, the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention, and The Aurora Chamber of Commerce. The event brought together approximately 85 attendees from throughout the state of Colorado. The event was promoted broadly to our members of the Health Links network, through the Center for Health, Work & Environment's listservs, newsletters, and social media. Additionally, we curated an invite list consisting of Peer Learning Series Participants and RFW Workgroup Members, These individuals received direct outreach via email invitation. Lastly, we published a press release discussing the partnership and promoting the event to the CU AMC network.

Employer Workgroup

The mission of the RFW Employer Workgroup is to convene Colorado employers who are champions for RFW policies and practices and be the voice of local employers on statewide RFW issues. The Workgroup developed as a continuation of our successful Peer Learning Series in partnership with the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention. Participants of the Series were directly invited to participate during the final session. We also recruited members through our Health Links monthly newsletters, and through Center for Health, Work & Environment newsletters and social media. Furthermore, we published a press release discussing the Initiative, Peer Learning Series and promoting the Workgroup. All of the information currently lives on the RFW webpage.

As of June 2023, the workgroup consists of 96 members representing 70 organizations in a variety of industries (academia, healthcare and social assistance, summer camps, global security and aerospace, restaurant and hospitality, business networks, construction, consulting, non-profit, for-profit, public health, and recovery community organizations).

Next Steps

The RFW initiative aims to benefit to the State of Colorado through increased access to behavioral health supports by way of workplace initiatives. Data from the Substance and Mental Health Services Administration show nearly 20% of Coloradans struggle with depression, anxiety, addiction, and suicide. Increasing access to behavioral health services and recovery-friendly programs offered through employers will result in fewer adverse behavioral health cases over time. Workplaces play a critical role and our progress in engaging employers has demonstrated that there is motivation to take action to adopt and implement better workplace supports for employees that face behavioral health challenges. Expanding these activities will increase the reach of these initiatives to new organizations.

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