

Are there unintended health consequences to hard work and success?

A Health Awareness Feature

By: Gelencia Dennis

On-time, under budget, and safety are three of the most understood and commonly used metrics to determine success in the construction industry. So, what does it take to meet or exceed these metrics? The short answer is a lot! After factoring in ways to survive the seasonality of construction work and the influences from the economy, it is reasonable for anyone's reply to be that it takes outstanding leadership, a motivated team, and a thorough project plan to be successful. But what else? There are three amazing truths about how projects get completed in construction. Regardless of size, scope, or complexity, most built projects get completed utilizing grit, ingenuity, and physical labor. The grit and ingenuity witnessed on sites across America speak volumes to the character and the work ethic of the men and women in construction. While we know how physical labor is exerted on a project site, we may not have adequately built ways to help workers address and recover from the physical and mental strains brought on by the many demands of meeting our success metrics.

Recently Welch and Rushe was approached by representatives from the State of Maryland's Department of Health, Behavioral Health Administration looking for a connection into the construction industry. This team of professionals is on a mission to bring greater awareness, offer confidential help, and share resources to those who may be overusing prescribed opioid mediations or at higher risk of harm due to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. In efforts to be both better informed and to lend a hand, we interviewed Maryland's Behavioral Health's Deputy Secretary, Dr. Aliya Jones, on this health awareness topic.

Q1): What is the mission of Maryland's Behavioral Health Administration and why is your team working to connect with the construction industry?

Dr. Jones: "It is the Behavioral Health Administration's (BHA) mission to develop and implement programming that prevents and treats problems related to substance use and mental health for all Marylanders. Recent data has shown that construction workers are at higher risk of harm, including death by alcohol and drug overdose. It is our responsibility to be aware and take proactive steps to spread the word about confidential help and connections to resources."

Q2) Over medicating and drug abuse are not new to many labor-intensive industries such as mining, manufacturing, agriculture, or hospitality. When did substance abuse become a high alert for the construction industry?

Dr. Jones: "While the exact timeline for increased incidents of over medicating in the construction industry is not known, the overall rate of opioid misuse in the United States began in the 1990s."

Q3. What makes the construction industry more prone to prescription misuse and substance abuse?

Dr. Jones: "The hazards of this type of work — including falls, injuries from overexertion, and being struck by or caught in heavy machinery — result in high injury and fatality rates. In particular, injuries from repetitive, strenuous work can lead to treatment or self-treatment with pain medication such as marijuana or opioids. (1 citation below)."

Q4. Why is this an important health awareness topic for the construction industry?

Dr. Jones: "The use of opioids and other substances to "self-medicate" physical injury or emotional stress due to chronic pain or injury can lead to substance use disorders and addiction. Substance use

disorders, particularly to opioids are a preventable cause of death due to overdose. Unfortunately, people who work in this industry have higher rates of overdose deaths than people who work in other, less physically risky, industries. Unidentified and treated substance use disorder, including due to opioids, also increases the risk of being injured on a worksite.”

Q5. Safety advocacy and safety training are consistent themes in construction industry in efforts to reduce project site accidents, maintain the quality of work being performed, and minimize medical and insurance costs for employees, unions, and construction company owners. What are the warning signs of someone who may be misusing either prescribed pain medication or other substances?

Dr. Jones: “Warning signs may include: frequent absences, especially without medical documentation; absences often occurring on a Friday or Monday; preventable workplace accidents that seem caused by distraction; changes in mood and interactions with others; leaving the worksite during work hours for unexplained reasons; frequent need for breaks; unusual levels of sleepiness or agitation; or furtive behaviors that could indicate hiding alcohol/drug supplies.”

Q6. For our readers, what are 3 of the most important take-aways about this topic that the construction industry needs to know?

Dr. Jones:

1. “If you work in the construction industry, because you are at an increased risk of having a substance use disorder, particularly after an injury, you need to be careful about taking pain medications for prolonged periods of time and watchful for signs of addiction.”
2. “If using opioids or other substances is interfering with your life in any way (i.e., at work, home, relationships), know that private help is available by calling 211 and pressing 1 to get to a call specialist who can identify resources in your area. You will need to consult with your insurance company to obtain specifics regarding coverage and who is approved to provide services. The Maryland Behavioral Health Administration has also compiled a comprehensive list of [virtual Recovery and Wellness Support Services](#) for the COVID-19 Outbreak, if you wanted to get more information and support anonymously.”
3. “Treatment works and a life without substances is possible.”

Q7. Where can people go to understand more and to find help?

Dr. Jones: “There are many ways to find more information about substance use that may be problematic, a visit to the following website will help you: [BeforeItsTooLateMD.gov](#). If anyone is ready to get help, they can call the Maryland Crisis Hotline at 211 and then press 1, or they can contact their health insurance company to identify options (if they have insurance). Please remember that not all services may be covered by insurance, so you may want to call your insurance carrier for their approved panel.”

Q8. In what ways does substance abuse affect the user’s health and the loved ones around them?

Dr. Jones: “According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, people with addiction are often at higher risk of getting one or more associated health issues, which could include lung or heart disease, stroke, cancer, hepatitis B and C, or mental health conditions. Drug use and mental illness often occur in the same person; drug use may trigger or worsen mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression. Family members and loved ones of an individual struggling with addiction may experience emotional damage, as well as financial, legal, medical, and other consequences.”

“Witnessing a parent struggle with substance abuse is especially difficult for children, and this trauma often has long-term effects on a child. Unfortunately, this is extremely common; an estimated one in five children grow up in a home where a parent abuses drugs or alcohol. When a child grows up around a parent who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, they are more likely to develop their own substance use disorder.”

Q9. What actions can people take immediately if they or someone they know is struggling with work related physical or emotional pain?

Dr. Jones: “It’s important to pay attention to the warning signs of work related physical or emotional pain so that it can be caught early on. If you think that your symptoms are related to your job, notify your employer immediately. For physical pain, you should also see a doctor as soon as possible. For emotional pain, you should see your primary care provider or a mental health professional. Most emotional pain will not go away on its own, and if untreated, it may get worse over time and cause serious problems.”

Q10. Our team has been able to identify at least five reputable online sources (released between 2019 to 2020) that address aspects of substance abuse in the construction industry. For example, an online article published on November 19, 2019 by USA Today indicated that 12.5% of construction workers use marijuana compared to 7.5% of all other workers^[1]. The article goes further to indicate that “Workers in the construction industry are most likely to use cocaine and misuse prescription opioids compared to other employees.” Construction workers and skilled tradesmen/tradeswomen do not usually boast about their work and they are also some of the hardest working people who take great pride in the craftsmanship they deliver to every project. The data that is surfacing is quite disturbing and unsettling for many of us in the construction industry and if not approached with care, it has the potential to bring shame and/or resistance to the findings. If this is anyone’s reality, how should we (as an industry) approach this health and safety concern without offending, shaming, or creating a negative perception that workers in the construction industry are drug addicts and alcoholics?

Dr. Jones: “If you treat having a substance use problem the same way that you see and address medical problems, you can avoid the blame and shame that is associated with having a substance use problem. Most problems that people develop are due to behaviors (i.e., being overweight can cause high blood pressure and diabetes, eating fried and unhealthy foods can cause high cholesterol and lead to heart attacks and strokes). Developing substance use problems has a genetic component, which is beyond the control of any of us, and is often also associated with childhood traumatic experiences, which is also beyond the control of the person who develops a problem with substances. If you understand that using substances to the point of developing the disease of addiction is not a choice that just about anyone makes, you can remember to treat the disease as the problem, and not the person which removes the blame and the shame.”

^[1]<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/11/05/drug-abuse-profession-most-likely-misuse-opioids-construction/4157650002/>

Citation 1 and 2 - <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/10/191030082825.htm>

Danielle C. Ompad, Robyn R. Gershon, Simon Sandh, Patricia Acosta, Joseph J. Palamar. **Construction trade and extraction workers: A population at high risk for drug use in the United States, 2005-2014.** *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 2019; 107640 DOI: [10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.107640](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.107640)