

Substance Use

Strategies to overcome obstacles keeping adults out of the workforce.



40%

OF EMPLOYEES ARE
SUBJECTED TO DRUG
TESTING POLICIES

1 IN 10

SAMPLES TAKEN
WILL GIVE
ERRONEOUS RESULTS

IN AMERICA

29 STATES

ALLOW MARIJUANA
FOR MEDICINAL USE

60%

OF AMERICANS APPROVE
OF THE LEGALIZATION OF
MARIJUANA

The Barrier

Substance use and drug testing policies contribute to high turnover and a decline in the region's labor force. Overall, 14,500 working-age adults have left the labor force over the past five years, and 18,000 jobs are vacant in West Michigan. Although they are not the only causes, substance use and drug testing policies play a negative role in labor force participation.

- Many recreational users don't apply to companies with pre-employment drug screening. With unemployment in West Michigan running consistently below 4%, some employers are considering discontinuing pre-employment testing to increase the potential applicant pool.
- Without careful consideration, testing policies can result in termination of productive employees. Test results indicate only when traces are present in a person's body, not whether a drug is affecting a person at work.
- Some drug-testing policies are outdated, unreliable or unnecessary. Testing for some substances, particularly marijuana, is becoming more complicated as both laws and attitudes shift.
- Drug testing can be unreliable both because of false positives and because detection is easy to avoid.

Leading Practices

Employers should develop smart substance use policies, with priorities on providing a safe work environment, increasing the number of applicants, restricting terminations to employees who put themselves or others at risk, and providing a constructive option for therapy referrals for employees who need help.

- Effective drug policies consider the intent of testing. Common reasons are: to reduce safety risks and liability, identify employees who need help to recover and return to work safely, demonstrate social responsibility, and to comply with industry or U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) regulations.
- Policies enacted to create a safer work environment are more likely to provide desired results when properly constructed. Zero-tolerance policies pose significant compliance challenges. Federal-compliance policies have specific requirements, but still leave a decision on what action to take after a positive test result.

Recommendations and Strategies

Ask questions to ensure policies reflect larger goals.

- Why do we conduct drug tests? Why should we continue drug testing?
- What actions do we take after a test comes back positive? Is there a treatment or referral program in place, rather than termination, for employees who test positive?
- When do we conduct tests, and why?
- Which drugs should we test for?
- Who do we ask to take a drug test?
- What testing method(s) should we use?
- How should our drug testing policies respond to the Michigan Medical Marijuana Program? How would they respond to legalization of recreational marijuana use?
- What is our substance use policy concerning alcohol?



After using data to identify four barriers to employment, the Workforce Development Working Group wanted to put a face to our research and test our insights. This persona project, compiled from interviews and the data, confirmed our research and insights, and gives us a clearer view of how barriers impact real people.

John's Story

A skilled worker afraid to apply.

"John" suffered chronic headaches and joint pain for more than a decade. His doctor tried many options over the years before prescribing medical marijuana. John says his prescription, taken after work, is why he was finally able to sleep at night.

However, his employer instituted a policy of random drug testing for all employees. When his test came back positive, he was fired. He never used on the job and did not operate heavy equipment, but the new zero-tolerance policy left no option for appeal.

Now he is looking for work. With a high school degree, technical training, solid resume and strong work ethic, his email is full of opportunities from online job boards.

But he refuses to apply for any that require pre-employment drug screening.

Even though he is legally allowed to use marijuana for his medical condition, John is skeptical employers will take his prescription into consideration. He has heard of ways to avoid a positive drug test, but his experience losing his last job left him unwilling to take that chance.

"I lost my job ... and lost my pride," John says.

For now, he is living off his savings and cutting back on expenses. He considered applying for disability but is more motivated by the hope of a job, steady pay, owning his own home, and having vacation and travel opportunities.

"I don't like being poor," he says.

Learn about other barriers in this series, and strategies for overcoming them.

- [Child Care](#)
- [Education and Skills](#)
- [Transportation](#)

[Read the full report on Substance Abuse here.](#)



48 Logan Street SW Suite 124 | Grand Rapids MI 49503
616.871.2450 | talent2025.org

