

# Addressing the Opioid Epidemic Among Midwest Construction Workers

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## Executive Summary

Every day across the country, more than 100 people die from opioid overdoses. One industry that has been disproportionately harmed by the opioid epidemic is construction. For example, in 2016, construction workers in Ohio were 7.24 times more likely to die of an opioid overdose than other workers.

Construction is one of the most physically demanding and dangerous occupations in the United States. The injury rate for construction workers is 77 percent higher than the national average for other occupations. In addition, an estimated 15 percent of construction workers have a substance abuse disorder, compared to the national average of 8.6 percent.

In recent years, most workers compensation claims have involved opioid prescriptions – as high as 60-80 percent in the Midwestern states reviewed in this study. Opioids account for about 20 percent of all total spending on prescription drugs in the construction industry, which is 5-10 percent higher than its share of spending in other industries.

**Estimated based on available data sources suggest nearly 1,000 construction workers across the Midwest died from an opioid overdose in 2015.**

- 164 construction workers in Illinois;
- 83 construction workers in Indiana;
- 32 construction workers in Iowa;
- 160 construction workers in Michigan;
- 54 construction workers in Minnesota;
- 380 construction workers in Ohio;
- 92 construction workers in Wisconsin.

**The opioid epidemic cost the Midwest's construction industry an estimated \$5.2 billion in 2015.**

- Illinois \$867 million;
- Indiana \$450 million;
- Iowa \$168 million;
- Michigan \$858 million;
- Minnesota \$292 million;
- Ohio \$2 billion; and
- Wisconsin \$524 million.

Each construction worker with an untreated substance abuse disorder costs an employer \$6,800 per year in excess healthcare expenses, absenteeism, and turnover costs. But when a construction employee is in recovery from a substance abuse disorder, contractors save nearly \$2,400 per year.

There are a variety of ways that contractors, labor unions, and elected officials can combat opioid addiction in the construction industry. Recommendations include:

1. Provide health insurance that covers substance abuse and mental health treatment.
2. Adopt new policies in health plans that limit dosages of opioid medications.
3. Encourage physical therapy and anti-inflammatory medications for chronic wear-and-tear injuries.
4. Educate employees about responsible prescription opioid use.
5. Provide at least two weeks of paid sick leave.
6. Update employee policies to include regular drug testing, but do not immediately fire employees who test positive.
7. Temporarily put employees on prescription opioids in low-risk positions.
8. Fund substance abuse treatment programs and workforce development initiatives.