How to Avoid Abuse

The physical toll of hard construction work on our members makes them more susceptible than many other workers to abusing painkillers and other prescription drugs and to possible addiction. An estimated 20 percent of people in the United States have used prescription drugs in a way other than prescribed; for the high, or without a prescription.

A recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that 5.1 million Americans are taking pain relievers without a doctor’s prescription while 2.2 million are taking tranquilizers, 1.1 million are taking stimulants and 400,000 are taking sedatives.

Most pain relievers are opioids, which operate on the brain much as heroin does; and opioid sales increased four-fold from 1999 to 2010, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

The Center’s National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that one in five American high school students have abused prescription drugs, notably the narcotic painkillers OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin.

While on the construction site, many of these same painkillers (OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin) are used to alleviate the pain of Laborers suffering common construction-related problems. When used properly and prescribed and supervised by a physician, these drugs can help Laborers recover from injuries by reducing pain and discomfort. It is when these drugs are abused by using them for the high rather than for relief that it becomes a problem for the construction site.

Research by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) research shows that between 10 and 20 percent of those who die on the job test positive for drugs and alcohol. The industries cited for the highest rates of drug and alcohol abuse and death rates include the high-risk occupations of construction and mining. The close interaction of construction Laborers on job sites means that the issue of drug abuse is not just a personal matter. It’s something that every employer must address and something that effects everyone on the site.

Abuse treatment must begin with a clear recognition that there’s a problem and successful treatment.
Bridge Work: Opportunity and Hazard

Too many of New York’s 17,000 bridges are deteriorating. About 12 percent are classified as structurally deficient — with load-bearing elements in poor or worse condition, with inadequate load capacity or closed by repeated flooding — and about 25 percent are classified as functionally obsolete; that is, with lanes that are too narrow, no shoulders or low overhead clearances.

Public demands for repairs have increased over time, bringing increasingly responsible attitudes toward infrastructure maintenance and repair among officials. This is good news for America and for our members as bridge work will likely increase. But, no type of work presents so many hazards to Laborers as bridge work. Laborers working on bridges are exposed to falls from structures and scaffolding, mishaps with cranes and hazards from such materials as asphalt and concrete, lead-based paints, new paints and solvents.

As bridge work by our members increases, it’s important to keep in mind hazards and safeguards related to this often dangerous work.

Falls and Scaffolding

- Use fall protection at heights of 10 feet or more; including guardrail systems, safety net systems or personal fall-arrest systems.
- Set up, move or dismantle scaffolds and ladders according to manufacturer’s specifications.
- Ensure all workers have received training before beginning scaffold work, recognizing that one type of training will not necessarily apply to all scaffold types.
- Do not load a scaffold or ladder beyond its rated capacity.
- Do not support scaffolds, planks or ladders with unstable objects such as barrels, loose brick or concrete block.
- Do not use wood planks damaged by rot, saw marks or cracks on a scaffold.
- Report any noticeable deficiencies to stewards or supervisors.

Cranes

Beware of:
- electrocution from overhead power lines,
- crane collapses,
- being struck by falling booms or jibs or by falling loads.

Lead-based paint

Older bridges (last painted before the late 1970s when lead was removed from most materials) present potential lead hazards.

Refer to lead-safety guidelines in this edition. (back page)

Night time bridge construction is becoming more common, so remember special precautions for night work:

- Stay alert; always get plenty of rest just prior to your shift to avoid drowsiness.
- Be seen; wear high visibility and retro-reflective clothing, headgear, armbands, flaggers’ gloves and a flashing light if possible.
- Light it up; ensure that the work zone is well lit, and place retro-reflective tape on all equipment.
- Cut the glare; when installing lighting within a work zone, avoid blinding workers and passing motorists. Consider lowering the height of lighting equipment to prevent this.
More and more Laborers will be involved in Green building projects in the future as uncertainty in energy supplies turns our attention to sustainable energy systems and energy conservation.

Just as LIUNA leads in training our members in the emerging jobs that this evolution brings, we must also lead in developing safety strategies to protect our members on these new jobs.

In short, new Green building technology introduces some new hazards on our job sites, and we must meet those new hazards with appropriate planning, awareness and attention to health and safety issues. In addition, project design that incorporates better construction site layout, the use of safer products and the introduction of fabrication can also help ensure members’ safety on Green projects.

Green projects include both weatherization to improve energy conservation and the installation of systems for generating energy or disposing of wastes.

For weatherization projects, hazards include falls and injuries from the handling of tools and materials, notably some types of insulation. Protective clothing is crucial on jobsites where these hazards occur, including gloves, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, protective eyewear and respirators for those handling and installing insulation.

For energy generation systems, perhaps the most prevalent emerging Green building technology is the combination of metal roofs and rooftop solar arrays for electrical generation or hot water systems. Consequently, the most prevalent new hazard for our members doing this work is falls from heights.

Fortunately, the Laborers have led in safety training and technology on job sites. Consequently, working with Green building technologies requires a new emphasis on safety measures that are already well known and used by our members.

We already have the safety tools at hand; we just have to be rigorous in using them. We must employ the appropriate safety measures for all these increased hazards, carefully assessing the increased risks that Green techniques and materials present and adapting our training and techniques accordingly.

Our members can be Green AND safe — and continue to lead in emerging building technologies.
“Lead is dead,” some might say, citing guidelines that enhance lead safety on the job. Although lead was outlawed from the consumer marketplace in 1978, we Laborers know that it remains in older buildings, in some common jobsite materials and some imported consumer goods. Rules require contractors to maintain healthy and safe workplaces, with protections against exposure to lead through dust and fumes, but we need to observe them carefully.

Lead is an airborne hazard because of lead dust. This is produced on jobsites by grinding, cutting, drilling, sanding, scraping or blasting surfaces coated with lead paints; by tearing down structures painted with lead paints; by cutting through leaded cables and wire; and by pouring powders containing lead pigments. Also, heat guns produce lead fumes when used to remove lead paint from surfaces; so does welding or soldering lead-containing materials, and torch-cutting painted and uncoated metal.

We can inhale lead dust or fumes or ingest dust that settles on hands, clothing, tools, hair, food and drink, even cigarettes. Our bodies store lead in our bones, blood and internal organs. It can cause serious problems including memory loss, muscle and joint pains, constipation and stomach disorders. We should watch out for early signs of lead poisoning including fatigue, headache, poor appetite and a metallic taste in the mouth.

Anything built before 1978 may contain lead-based paint and there is some use of lead in industrial applications after 1978 on bridge work, for example. So we may have to deal with lead in any residential, commercial or public building of that age or older. Contractors working on such buildings must obtain federal and state certifications. And we Laborers must work by the rules, for our health and our families’ health.

**AVOID LEAD CONTAMINATION**

To protect Laborers from lead hazards, employers generally must:

- Control exposure through properly functioning exhaust ventilation
- Use safe housekeeping practices regularly:
  - No compressed air or dry-sweep to remove dust
  - Instead, use a vacuum with a high efficiency filter (HEPA) or wet-cleaning methods
- Provide a clean lunchroom separate from work areas
  - Don’t eat, drink, smoke or store such materials in work areas
  - Wash face and hands before eating
  - Clean the lunchroom after each shift
- Provide respirators
- Provide protective clothing and gloves
  - Don’t wear protective clothing off the job site
- Hold regular training on:
  - The hazards of lead exposure
  - Effective control measures including engineering controls and work practices
  - Effective use of respiratory protection and the limitations of respirators
  - Good personal hygiene
  - Understanding blood lead levels and testing
  - How to avoid bringing lead off the job site and home to endanger families and friends

Lead can be a serious health hazard on the job. Fortunately, serious and effective safeguards are in place to protect Laborers in dealing with it.

But avoiding bringing lead contamination home with us could be just the start. Many imported toys and cosmetics contain lead. So check these products before using them or allowing children to use them. Any product that seems unusually heavy, malleable or soft may contain lead.

You can determine if they contain lead by using a lead detection kit from hardware stores or the housewares section of department stores.

Be lead-safe and lead-free; for your health and your family.