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HELPING WORKPLACE RECOVERY

An interview with IMPACT's New England Regional Advisory Board Co-Chair

On Shawn Nehiley's first day as an iron worker apprentice for Local 7 in 1988 he "fell in love with the trade" and nothing has changed thirty-four years later. Nehiley worked in "the gang" for over two decades, becoming a steward on many large projects. This led him to run for office at Local 7. He held the positions of Trustee, Chairman of the Executive Board, Organizer, Business Agent, and Business Manager. Shawn went on to become the President of the Iron Workers District Council of New England.

Additionally, Nehiley is on the New England Regional Board of Directors for Ironworker Management Progressive Action Cooperative Trust (IMPACT) and Co-Chairman of the NE Benefit funds – which provides comprehensive health insurance and

retirement plans for iron workers unions in the region. Shawn brings his focus and passion for helping iron workers recover from substance use disorder (SUD) to these positions.

WORKING NATIONWIDE TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF SUD IN THE INDUSTRY

IMPACT tirelessly advocates for unionized ironworkers and their contractors across the U.S. and Canada. With SUD, overdose, and suicide rates sadly skyrocketing in the industry, IMPACT has concentrated on mental health and drug use awareness, prevention, and recovery.

Nehiley plays a large part in those efforts, and his own journey of addiction and recovery drives him to "break the cycle".

Recovery meetings and education are now wholly integrated into IMPACT's national programs, including all their functions and conferences.

MESSAGING IS CRITICAL

With the stigma around seeking help, especially in construction, how can we break the cycle? "The most important message that we try to get out there is that it's okay to ask for help" Nehiley states.

"It's vital to keep the messaging consistent – from the top down. Many are ashamed and scared to seek help, but a narrative of understanding, rather than 'finger-pointing', allows workers to take that first step".

Nehiley also believes it is vital to change the narrative of substance abuse and mental health issues. "It's not a weakness and it can happen to any of us". Shawn thinks it is important to speak often on these issues to have a face with the message. "The goal of speaking is to change one person's mind regarding the stigma that surrounds these issues, and even if it is just one person who reaches out after hearing the message then this is a success. That saves a person, that saves a family".

WHAT RESOURCES AND BEST PRACTICES SHOULD BTEA NORTHEAST KNOW ABOUT?

“Reaching out for help to a supervisor or union representative might seem daunting, but workers should know that listeners are more understanding than you’d think. More employers are seeing the struggle of substance abuse disorders and mental health issues each day and are adopting ways for employees to safely seek help. With Labor and Management having the same consistent message more people will be willing to step forward without fear”.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) are available to all BTEA members – offering free confidential assessments, short-term counseling, referrals, and follow-up services if you’re struggling with SUD or mental health. “The EAP can give someone struggling a different perspective and can change the way they view themselves”.

BTEA Northeast’s Second Annual Building Trades National Recovery Week, a national substance use awareness campaign, begins the week of April 25th offering resources and training. Nehiley will be speaking there and encourages all BTEA employers to attend.