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Drug-test program benefits Maui hotel

By [Dan Nakaso](#)
 Advertiser Staff Writer

The management and union leaders of Maui's Ka'anapali Beach Hotel say they just wanted to set a good example for the community by instituting periodic drug testing seven years ago.

So they weren't quite prepared for the improved work environment that followed, or the 44 percent decline in accident rates and \$40,000 to \$45,000 annual savings in workers' compensation premiums.

"We did it because we felt it was the right thing to do," said Mike White, the Ka'anapali Beach Hotel's general manager. "I don't think we were aware of the savings and potential for accident rates to go down."

The Ka'anapali Beach Hotel currently is negotiating to hire Maui companies to continue periodic, unannounced drug testing and to provide drug rehabilitation and other employee assistance programs connected to drug use.

In reviewing the results of the program so far, White said he was surprised by the change in the hotel's workplace and the savings.

The \$10,000 annual cost for the program has been more than offset by such changes as a drop in workers' compensation

How testing program works

Ka'anapali Beach Hotel's "drug-free workplace" program

- Each member of a departments is tested periodically, all at once and immediately, with lab technicians coming to the hotel.

- Those who test positive are suspended for two weeks without pay and referred to drug treatment.

- For the next year, anyone who tests positive is subject to unannounced testing.

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claims — to about \$83,000 per year from nearly \$172,000 per year.

The average annual cost per claim also fell to \$3,599 from \$6,613 per claim. And the accident rate fell to an average of 2.9 accidents from an annual average of 5.2 accidents per 100 full-time equivalent employees.

By comparison, the hotel cites state statistics that show an average of 8.5 accidents per 100 full-time equivalent employees for Hawaii's hotel and lodging industry overall.

"When you lower the drug use, you're bringing your big accidents down and you're bringing your small accidents down," White said. "We've got people who work in the kitchens with knives and heat, and people with machines out on the lawn. We've got people lifting boxes, using carts, using mowers and forklifts and chemicals ... You name it, we've got it."

Because they had no drug-testing agreement with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Ka'anapali managers only tested before hiring an employee or when they had a "reasonable suspicion" that a worker was under the influence at work.

Getting the hotel's ILWU officials to agree to unannounced, periodic drug testing and discipline actually was relatively easy, White said. But hotel union leaders got plenty of resistance from their ILWU counterparts at other hotels and at the local headquarters, said Hanalei Peters, the hotel's ILWU unit chairman.

"I told them, 'I see it a different way,' " Peters said. "You can keep the problem their (drug users') problem until it falls on our lap because they kill somebody or steal from you or your neighbors. Then it becomes a community problem."

While management and union officials were negotiating the details of the program in 1996, Peters thought of friends who died because of drugs.

He would also visit his daughter, who lived near a family in which two young children often yelled at their parents about the parents' drug abuse.

"The boy and girl would say, 'How can we stay off of drugs when you're on drugs?' " Peters said. "The brother knew what to do. He got out. The girl's about 16 now, and man is she wasted. She's gone. She's lost. If we can quench this thirst for drugs, I think this would be a much better place."

After periodic drug testing began in 1997, 12 employees tested positive in the first year and have been followed by 11 others — including managers.

The majority have been caught with methamphetamines in their system (60 percent), followed by marijuana (30 percent) and cocaine (10 percent).

All of them faced two-week, unpaid suspensions. None were fired. But most have quit, many after failing their subsequent drug-rehabilitation programs, White said.

"There were several people I was surprised tested positive," White said. "What was evident very quickly was that we had the exact same percentage of management involved as we did line employees. ... Quite a few have actually declined treatment because they didn't feel they were ready to address the problem."

Left behind is a workforce of about 250 members of the ILWU and another 50 or so managers.

Morale has since improved in the hotel's biggest department, the 100-person food and beverage section. And it's easier to count on employees to report to work on time, said Tom Fairbanks, the department's director.

"We certainly don't have the problems we had before, everything from personalities to sick calls to incredible workmens' comp claims," Fairbanks said. "Now it's easy to run our operation. Some people were carrying more than their side of the canoe. Now they don't have to compensate for those guys who didn't show up for work or cover for the guys that were out of it because of drugs."

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