

First Choice Health program helps employers tackle opioid abuse

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Seattle-based First Choice Health has launched a program to inform employers of the potential for opioid abuse among their employees.

The health benefits administration company will analyze pharmacy claims through prescriptions to identify whether prescription opioid abuse is a problem in a client's workforce, Chief Medical Officer John Robinson said.

"The problem has been employers really haven't known if they have a problem," Robinson said. "They may occasionally find an employee with a problem but they don't really know the scope of it."

A [poll](#) by the National Safety Council indicates that 75 percent of employers have been affected by employee use of opioids, but nearly a third don't feel prepared to deal with it.

The population health report, which First Choice provides clients for free, gives employers a general idea while maintaining specific workers' confidentiality.

"The assessments, assistance and education used in this program are completely confidential," Robinson said. "The privacy of First Choice Health's clients and patients could not be more important to us, in this program and others, and we would not share the names of any organization or individual involved unless they have given their explicit consent."

If employers find their internal metrics alarming, First Choice case managers and employee assistance programs can reach out to workers, determine if they are having issues with their medications and refer them to treatment.

First Choice hired two case management nurses for this program, and Robinson said the company will add more if demand increases.

Robinson said that First Choice is finishing a two-month pilot program with one large client. Some workers out of the pilot were interested in treatment, though case managers couldn't contact others, Robinson said.

"What identifies us is we use these analytics to find these people," he said. "Having that personal touch, of not just giving a flyer or website, but having somebody reach out to member and offer help is a real advantage."

The program is along the lines of CEO Jaja Okigwe's [growth strategy](#). In September, he told the Business Journal that the then-budding opioid analysis could turn into a sellable product. Robinson, though, said the project is more concerned with helping the opioid epidemic than generating revenue.

Washington state saw 742 reported opioid overdose deaths in 2017, nearly half of which were from prescription drugs, [according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse](#). This marks the highest number of annual deaths since numbers became available in 1999, though the rate involving prescriptions has steadily decreased since the mid-2000s.

First Choice began developing the program two or three years ago when construction companies — which were not clients at the time — reached out from concern that opioid abuse among their heavy-equipment-operating workforce could be dangerous.

"They were wondering if there were any solutions out there," Robinson said. "We didn't have program at that time, but we have refined it since then."



FIRST CHOICE HEALTH

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