



Recovery
Friendly
WORKPLACE

Supporting Employees Affected by Substance Use Disorder

Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative®

David Shapiro

SEPTEMBER 2025



Welcome

The Centers for Health, Work & Environment is an academic center within the Colorado School of Public Health based at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

We put public health research into practice through signature *Total Worker Health*® programs like Health Links®, WeCANWork, Psychological Preparedness for K12 Educators, and the Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative®.

About Me:



David Shapiro
Assistant Director of
Programs & Partnerships

Person in Recovery
(Cannabis Use Disorder)

MPH Leadership and
Public Health Practice
(Spring 2026)

Treasurer, Society for
Total Worker Health™

Our Partners

Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention

Recovery Friendly Workplace Employer Workgroup.



Recovery Friendly Leader

A mission-driven organization empowering leaders with recovery-based solutions for businesses to thrive.

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

NIOSH is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).



Colorado State Legislature

State-initiated voluntary recovery friendly workplace program in the Centers for Health, Work, and Environment at the Colorado School of Public Health.



Recovery
Friendly
WORKPLACE

Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative®

Helping employers respond to substance use, mental health, and addiction in the workplace and beyond.

Employers play a critical role in elevating the importance of mental health in the workplace.

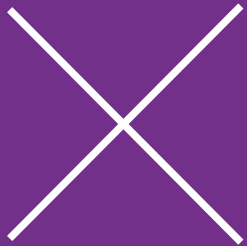


Substance Use Spectrum

Substance use ranges from responsible to uncontrolled. A person's use can change over time.

- **Responsible use** means using something like alcohol or prescription medication for a specific reason and in a safe way.
- **Addiction** happens when someone can't stop using a substance or engaging in a behavior (like gambling, shopping, or eating), even when it causes problems in their life. Addiction is a severe form of substance use disorder, but it can be treated and managed.
- **Substance use disorder (SUD)** is the medical term for ongoing substance use that leads to harm, such as health issues, trouble at work or school, or difficulty meeting responsibilities at home.

Substance Use Spectrum continued



Non-Use



**Prescribed
Use**



**Lower-Risk
Use**



**Higher-
Risk Use**



Addiction

**Experimental
Social Use**

Recognizing and Diagnosing SUDS

1

Physical Symptoms

- Tolerance:** Needing more to get the same effect.
- Withdrawal:** Feeling sick when stopping or cutting back.
- Craving:** Strong urge to use the substance.

3

Giving Up Important Activities

- Spending a lot of time using or recovering from use.
- Losing interest in hobbies, work, or responsibilities.

2

Loss of Control

- Using more or longer than planned.
- Struggling to cut down or quit.

4

Problems Caused by Use

- Trouble keeping up with work, school, or home life.
- Continuing use despite social or health problems.
- Using in risky situations (like driving under the influence).

Variations in Severity

SUDs can be mild, moderate, or severe, based on the number of symptoms a person has:

Mild SUD

2-3 symptoms

53% of people with SUD
have a **mild** case.

Moderate SUD

4-5 symptoms

23% of people with SUD
have a **moderate** case.

Severe SUD

6+ symptoms

24% of people with SUD
have a **severe** case.

❖ The term “**addiction**”
is often used for
severe cases.

What is Recovery?

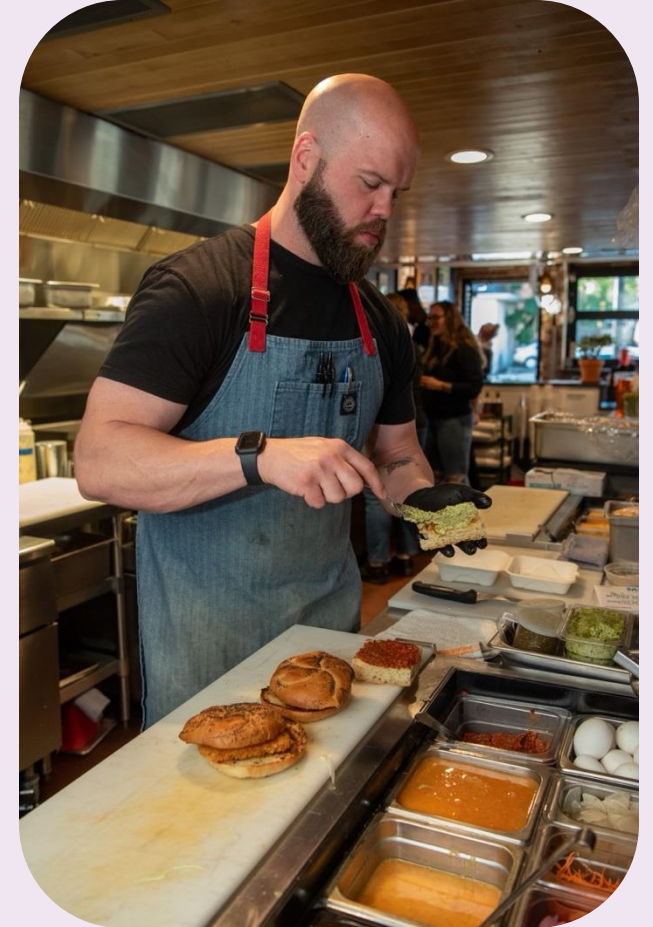
- Recovery is a journey of change, where individuals improve their health, regain independence, and work toward their full potential.
- **A Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW)** is an organization that actively supports employees in recovery. It uses proven policies and practices to recognize recovery as a strength and create a supportive environment.
- RFWs help build safe, healthy, and productive workplaces where employers, employees, and communities work together to remove barriers and create positive change.



Definition

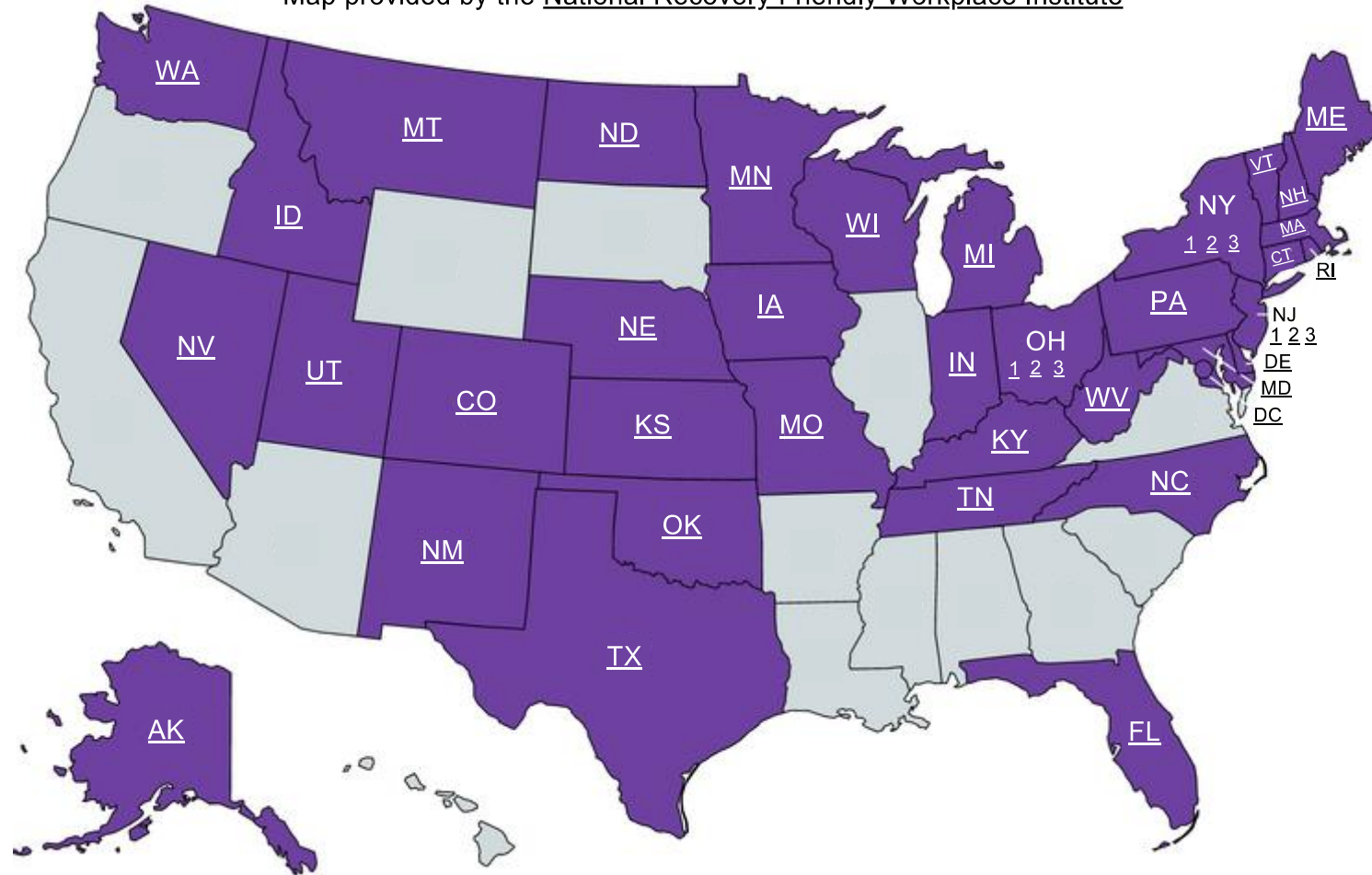
Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative:

An organization that uses **evidence-based policies, practices, and programs** to **unite** the entire organization by recognizing **recovery from addiction as a strength** and by being willing to work intentionally with people in recovery.



Recovery Friendly Workplace National Map

Map provided by the [National Recovery Friendly Workplace Institute](#)



States engaged in some level of Recovery Friendly Workplace work. See note.

Supporting People in Recovery Matters...

People spend roughly **one-third** of their lives at work. In some industries and professions, substance



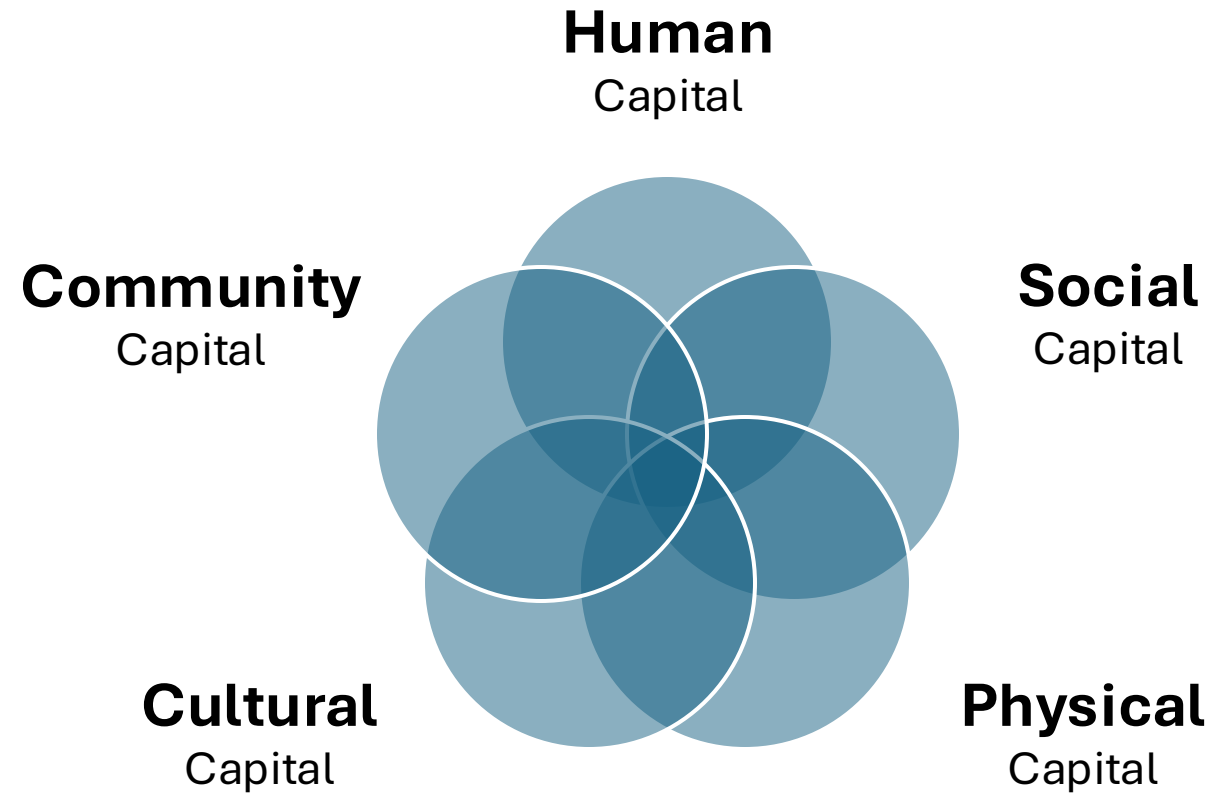
An estimated **48.5 million Americans (17%)** aged 12 or older had a SUD in the past year. Of these individuals:

- **28.9 million (60%)** had an alcohol use disorder.
- **27.2 million (56%)** had other drug use disorders.
- **7.5 million (15%)** had both an alcohol and other drug use disorder.

26.7 million Americans aged 18 or older with a substance use disorder were employed.

- Of these individuals, **20.9 million (78.2%)** worked full-time.

Recovery Capital



Cloud & Granfield (2008)
White & Cloud (2008)

Other Stressors Affect Recovery

Work can influence outcomes

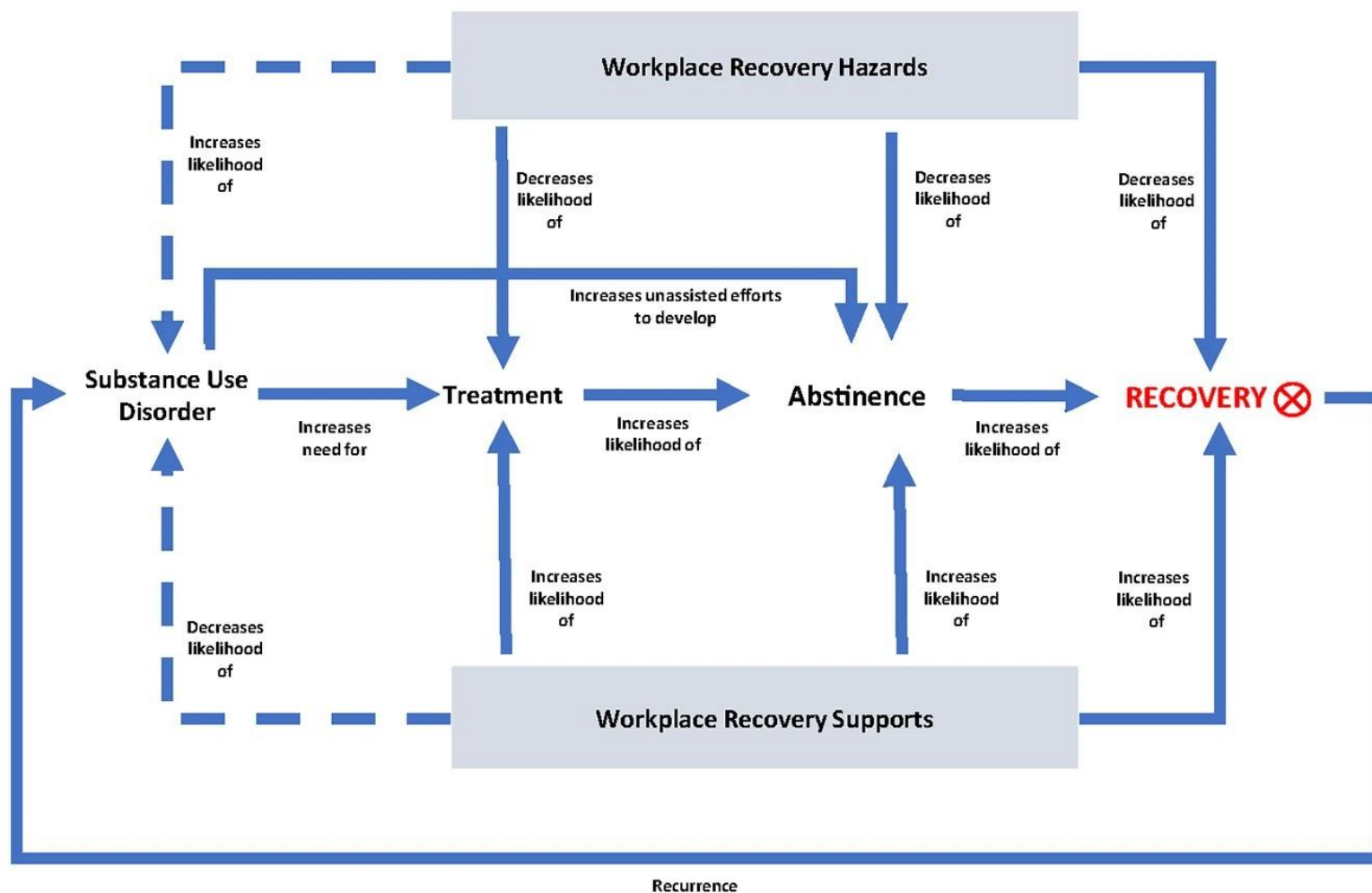
Stress at work can affect a person's recovery, but stress from personal life also plays a role. These stresses go both ways—work stress impacts home life, and stress at home impacts work.

By understanding that stress comes from many places, workplaces can create a supportive environment that cares for the whole person, not just their job.



Workplace Hazards

Workplace Recovery Hazards and Supports



How It Works:

- ✓ Reduces workplace risks like unhealthy work conditions, substance availability, stigma, and substance use norms.
- ✓ Provides support through positive work conditions, social connections, and organizational resources.
- ✓ Helps employees keep or regain jobs while in recovery.
- ✓ Improves well-being for employees, workplaces, families, and communities.

Workplace supported recovery from substance use disorders: defining the construct, developing a model, and proposing an agenda for future research. M. R. Frone, L. C. Chosewood, J. C. Osborne and J. J. Howard, *Occupational Health Science*, 2022, Vol. 6 Issue 4, pages 475-511.

Fair Chance Hiring: Opening Doors for All

Fair chance hiring ensures employers consider all qualified candidates, regardless of their criminal record.



Why It Matters:

- **1 in 3 U.S. adults (77 million people)** has a criminal record, which can create barriers to jobs, housing, and education.
- A criminal record can follow someone for decades, even after they've served their time.

Benefits for Employers:

- Expands the talent pool with diverse, skilled candidates.
- Helps businesses better understand their customers and improve workplace culture.
- Leads to stronger hiring outcomes and more inclusive workplaces.

For more information, visit the [National Conference of State Legislators webpage](#) on criminal records and reentry.

Before Getting the Job: Background Checks and Hiring

The criteria for assessing criminal background information are based on convictions and not arrest records. Sealed records will not be accessed. A “conviction” means a verdict, a guilty plea or a Nolo Contendere (“No Contest”) plea. In addition, if a disposition is “pending” or “deferred” or if there is an outstanding warrant(s), central Human Resources reserves the right to follow up with the Candidate regarding the outcome of the case(s) prior to a pass/fail letter being sent. The Candidate will be required to provide court documentation as determined by central Human Resources. A Candidate will be considered to have “passed” the criminal background check if they meet *all* of the criteria listed below:

- a. No felony convictions for drug use or distribution in the seven (7) years immediately preceding the submission of their application for employment or promotion at the university.
- b. No felony convictions for serious or violent felonies, including but not limited to, homicide or sexual assault (no time limit).
- c. In all other circumstances where convictions are found, the job-relatedness of the convictions will be taken into account.
- d. No active warrants.

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The criteria to be considered in this analysis include, but are not limited to:

- (1) whether the convictions were disclosed on the application form;
- (2) the nature and gravity of the offense(s);
- (3) the time that has elapsed since the conviction and/or the completion of the sentence and any other remediation;
- (4) the nature of the position;

Workplace Hazards

1

Substance Availability

Access to alcohol or drugs at work increases the risk of misuse and cravings.

2

Workplace Culture

- After-work “happy hours” can pressure employees to drink, making recovery harder.
- Social pressure may lead to return-to-use, or discourage participation in recovery support.

3

Technology & Remote Work

Flexible schedules can help with recovery, but remote work may also increase the risk of substance misuse during work hours.

4

Work Stress & Environment

- Hazardous or high-stress jobs can be a challenge for maintaining recovery.
- Certain people, places, and situations may act as reminders of previous misuse.

Prejudice and Discrimination

People in recovery often face prejudice and discrimination at work. Many misunderstand substance use disorders (SUDs), leading to blame and shame instead of support.

- **Prejudice** happens when people judge others based on false beliefs or limited information.
- **Discrimination** occurs when workers with SUDs are treated unfairly because of their past.

A national study found that disclosing past substance use often led to negative treatment at work. Participants reported both major (macro) discrimination and small, everyday (micro) discrimination.

Macro Discrimination

- Difficulty finding a job.
- Losing a job.
- Failing to get a promotion

Micro Discrimination

- Others expecting them to return to use.
- Being socially excluded—ignored and avoided.
- Receiving unfavorable treatment.
 - Treated less favorably.
 - Disrespected.
 - Treated like a criminal or dangerous
- Being held to higher standards than other employees.

The Impact of Stigma on Recovery

Stigma refers to unfair, negative beliefs about a group of people. When it comes to substance use disorders (SUDs), stigma can lead to false assumptions—such as believing people with SUDs are dangerous, incapable of recovery, or to blame for their condition.

In reality, addiction is a chronic, treatable medical condition, and people can recover and lead healthy lives.

Workplace Stigma & Barriers to Recovery

Fear of judgment or job loss stops many from seeking treatment:

- 38% avoid treatment due to stigma.
- 20% worry treatment could cost them their job.
- 17% fear negative judgment.

Employer vs. Employee Views

- Employers often view SUDs with mistrust, making recovery harder.
- Employees struggle with stigma, making it difficult to seek help, stay employed, and recover successfully.

Co-Occurring Disorders

Co-occurring disorders happen when a person has both a substance use disorder (SUD) and a mental health condition at the same time or one after the other. This can make both conditions more severe.

People with co-occurring disorders have a higher risk of returning to substance use, even after recovery.

Factors that May Lead to a Return-to-Use

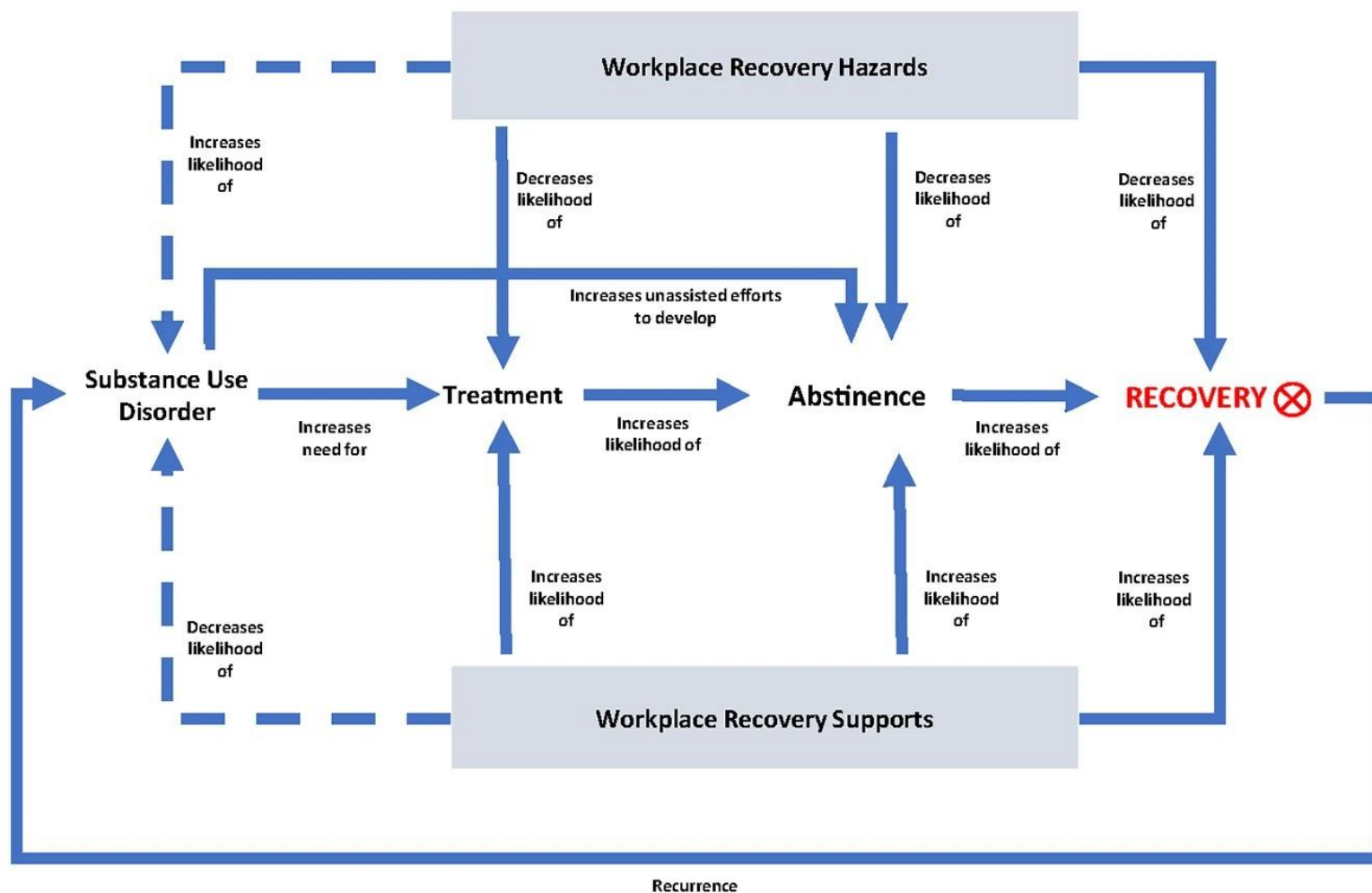
- Worsening mental health
- Social pressure (friends, community, workplace)
- Lack of support systems
- Living in high-risk environments
- Limited access to treatment

Supporting mental health is key to long-term recovery.



Workplace Supports

Workplace Recovery Hazards and Supports



How It Works:

- ✓ Reduces workplace risks like unhealthy work conditions, substance availability, stigma, and substance use norms.
- ✓ Provides support through positive work conditions, social connections, and organizational resources.
- ✓ Helps employees keep or regain jobs while in recovery.
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Positive Work Conditions

While news often highlights rising addiction rates and overdose deaths, the reality is **most people with substance use disorders (SUDs) recover**. A 2020 CDC study found that **about 75% of individuals recover from addiction**.

Accommodations

- Flex time
- Flexible schedule
- Work from home
- Rest breaks
- Temporary job assignments (when necessary)

Benefits

- Health insurance
- Paid sick leave
- Unpaid leave (FMLA)
- Short-term disability insurance
- Financial well-being

Arrangements

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Job-sharing
- Adjust daily schedules

Communication

- Support on how & when to disclose
- Compassion when approaching an employee
- Regular meetings with supervisors
- Mentoring

Culture

- Empathy
- Honesty
- Understanding

Examples of Positive Work Conditions

Positive work conditions provide essential resources for **recovery & well-being**. A **supportive workplace** empowers employees in recovery and strengthens the entire organization.



✓ **Access to Support** – Mental health services, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and SUD services.

✓ **Open Communication** – Trust-building feedback and a sense of belonging.

✓ **Job Security & Stability** – A safe and supportive work environment.

✓ **An Inclusive Culture** – No stigma or fear of discrimination when seeking help.

✓ **Reasonable Accommodations** – Flexibility for treatment and recovery support.

✓ **Helpful Resources** – Tools to meet job demands and stay engaged.

✓ **Fair Treatment & Meaningful Work** – Supportive teams, skill development, and job satisfaction.

✓ **Recognition & Rewards** – Appreciation for efforts to boost morale.

A photograph of two men hiking in a forest. The man on the left is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and has a blue backpack. The man on the right is wearing a red and white plaid shirt, a brown baseball cap, and a blue backpack. They are both smiling and high-fiving each other. A purple banner is overlaid on the image with the title.

The Power of Social Support in Recovery

Strong **social connections** and **support systems** at work can help prevent substance misuse and support recovery.

- ✓ **Collaborative work roles** make substance use more noticeable, discouraging misuse.
- ✓ **Union programs like Member Assistance Programs (MAPs)** provide peer support, referrals, and recovery monitoring.
- ✓ **Peer-based support** helps individuals recognize their condition, seek treatment, and build a strong recovery community.

A **supportive workplace culture** makes recovery easier and benefits everyone.

Workplace Supported Recovery

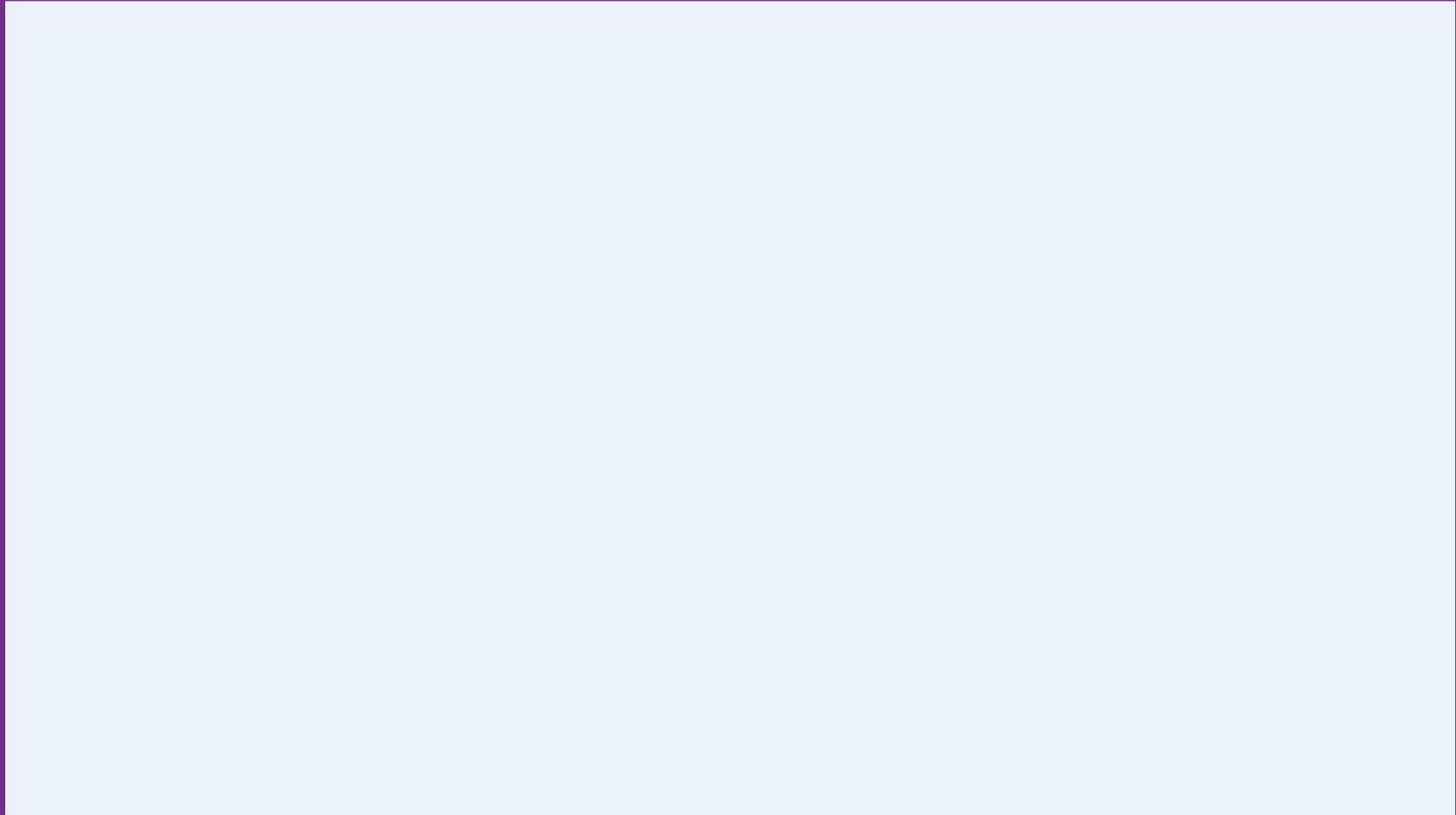
Hurtful Language (<i>old</i>)	Helpful Language (<i>new</i>)
Addict, alcoholic, junkie, drunk	Person with a substance [alcohol, opioid, et.] use disorder
Abuse, drug problem, “addiction”	Substance use or substance misuse
Relapse, “fell off the wagon”	Return to use, recurrence of use
“Dirty” or “clean” lab results	Positive or negative lab results
Detox	Withdrawal management
Drug offender, criminal, prisoner, parolee	Person involved with criminal justice; person currently incarcerated/formerly incarcerated



Words Matter

Language is Key

Stop Stigma



Organizational Support

People-centered workplaces that prioritize **employee well-being** and **recovery support** can help prevent substance misuse.

- ✓ Clear, supportive policies on substance use help deter misuse.
- ✓ Well-defined steps for handling disclosures ensure employees get the help they need.
- ✓ Transparency and fair enforcement make employees feel safe seeking support.

A workplace that values **openness and support** fosters recovery and long-term success.



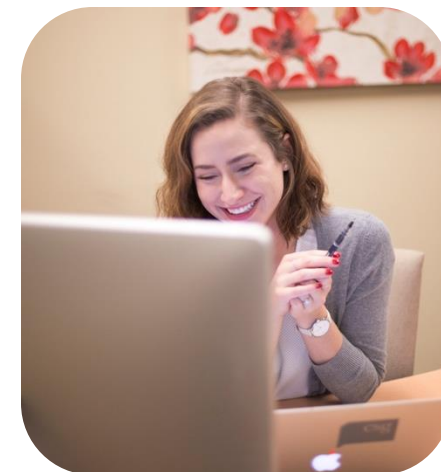
The Role of Leadership in a Supportive Workplace

Strong leadership is key to a healthy and safe work environment. Supportive leadership creates a workplace where employees feel valued and empowered.



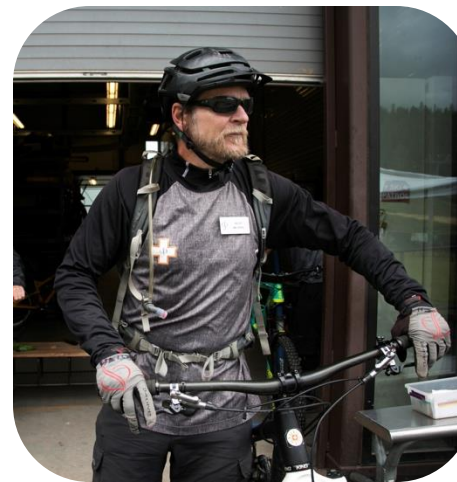
Train & Support Supervisors

- Equip them to assist employees in recovery.
- Provide guidance on SUD referrals.
- Foster trust through regular check-ins.



Show Commitment

- Communicate the importance of health and well-being.
- Encourage open discussions about workplace safety.
- Make health, safety, and well-being core values.



Recognize & Encourage Employees

- Offer consistent, positive feedback, especially for those in recovery.

Workplace Support Programs

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

EAPs help employees manage challenges that affect their work, including health, financial, social, mental health, and substance misuse.

They offer:

- Education & assessments
- Management consultations
- Referrals to treatment
- Short-term counseling

It's important to ensure all employees know about and can access EAP benefits.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

ERGs are peer-led support groups that provide extra resources and encouragement.

Examples include:

- Salesforce Soberforce
- Cisco Systems Sober Curious
- **University of Colorado Recovery & Resilience Support Group**

These programs create a workplace where employees feel supported in their recovery journey.

The Colorado RFW provides assistance to organizations choosing an EAP or starting an ERG.
Reach out to learn more:
contact@COPrecoveryFriendlyWorkplace.org

Federal and State Legal Protections

Individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) have legal protections under various federal and state sources

**US Equal Employment
Opportunity
Commission (EEOC)**

**Americans with
Disabilities Act (ADA)**

**Family and Medical
Leave Act (FMLA)**

**Colorado's Family and
Medical Leave
Insurance (FAMLI)**

**Consolidated
Omnibus
Reconciliation Act
(COBRA)**

**Affordable Care Act
(ACA)**

**US Drug-free
Workplace Act (1988)**

**Omnibus
Transportation
Employee Testing Act
of 1991 (OTETA)**

Balancing Workplace Policies on Substance Use

Organizations must carefully shape policies that address substance use while supporting employees.



❖ **Zero-tolerance policies** can discourage employees from seeking help, leading to:

- Lower productivity & more absenteeism
- Higher injury risks
- Increased workers' compensation costs



❖ **Clear policies** help prevent substance misuse and create a safer workplace.

❖ **Tolerant workplaces** may increase the risk of misuse among employees.



A balanced approach ensures accountability while encouraging support for employees in recovery.



Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative®



A Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW)

Workers in recovery (defined as those who have completed treatment and remained substance-free for at least 12 months) have the **lowest absenteeism rates**, missing an average of **10.9 days per year**—even less than the general workforce.

A Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW) creates a **healthier, more productive** work environment with:

- ✓ Higher productivity & employee retention
- ✓ Greater job satisfaction
- ✓ Fewer absences & reduced turnover

By **supporting recovery**, RFWs help build **stronger teams**, **improve workplace morale**, and **boost overall success**.

Becoming a Recovery Friendly Workplace

➤ RFW Checklist for Employers

1. Participate in the RFW Program

- **Submit Letter of Intent**
- Notify employees and board members in writing about your organization's intent to participate in the program.
- Complete the orientation process by **scheduling** a brief (25-minute) advising session.

2. Be Certified as a Colorado Recovery Friendly Workplace™

- Fulfill all steps required to become a participant in the program.
- Assess current policies, procedures, and practices and identify areas for improvement.
 - **Health Links® Workplace Mental Health Survey**
- With your RFW Advisor, establish goals to enhance workplace-supported recovery.
- Provide training and education (like this training) to support employees affected by substance use disorders.



Colorado Recovery Resource Guide

If you or someone you know is in crisis, feeling overwhelmed, or in need of urgent mental health or substance use support, **call or text 988**.

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** provides free and confidential support 24/7, connecting you with trained crisis counselors who can offer immediate assistance and resources.

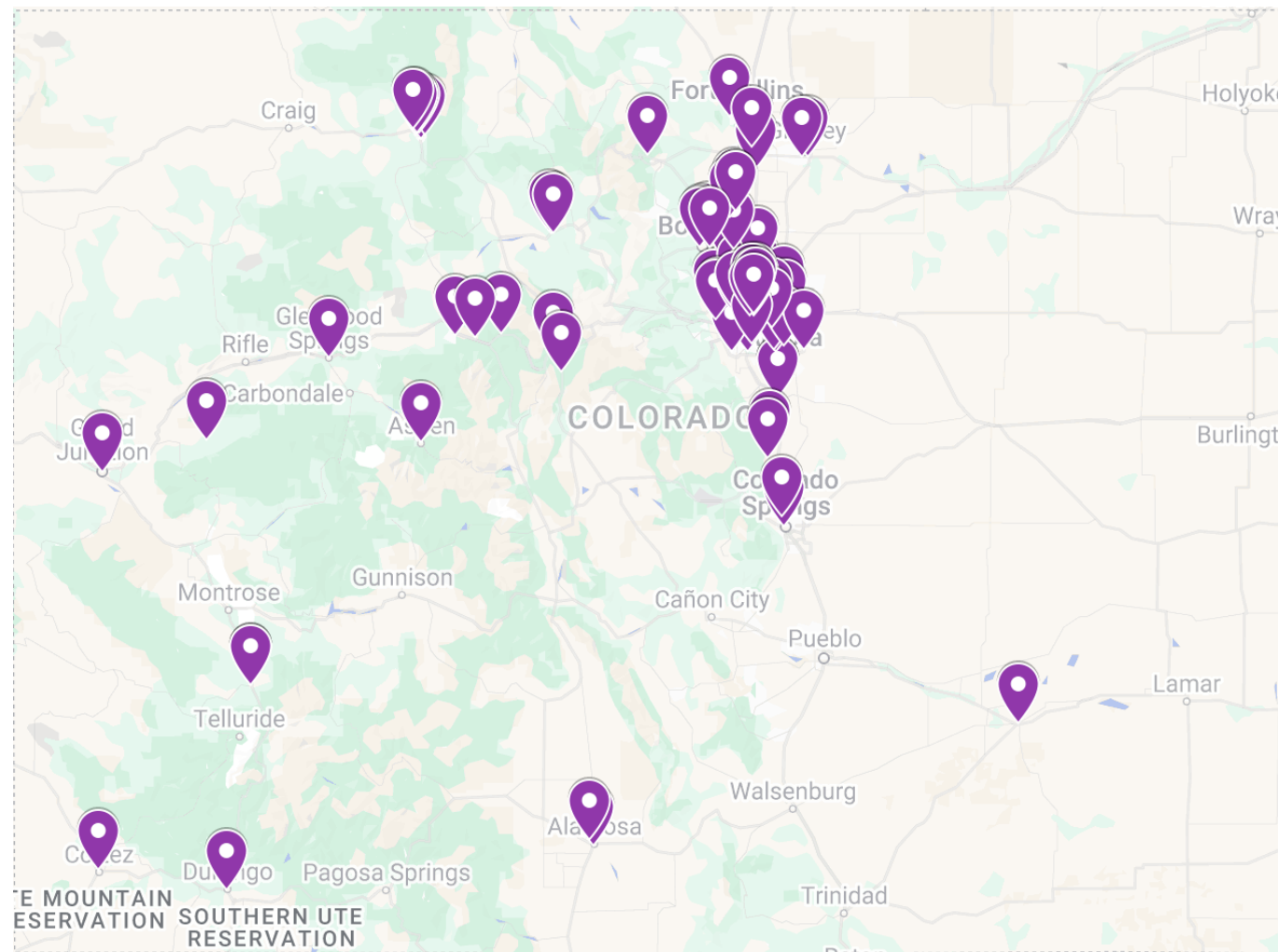
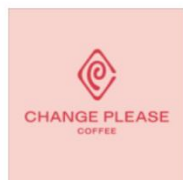
Don't hesitate to reach out; help is available.

- Access our [Colorado Recovery Resource Guide by completing this quick form.](#)



124 Participating Employers (45,000+ workers)

20 RFW Certified (23 Colorado Counties)



Personal Stories

Recovery Stories



Ruth's Story

"With support from my workplace, I rebuilt my career. I took on new roles, regained my confidence, and became an advocate."



Cara & Cliff's Story

"Seventy percent of our staff is active in recovery. We try to provide a safe space where people can feel comfortable."



Grayson's Story

"I reached out to my supervisor and asked for help. That conversation was one of the hardest, but it changed everything."

Thank You.

www.CORecoveryFriendlyWorkplace.org



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