Influencing Taft-Hartley Funds to Provide and Promote Tobacco Cessation Benefits

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Aims

This study was designed as a community-academic research project to develop strategies to increase access to and utilization of tobacco cessation coverage among the blue-collar workforce. To accomplish this goal, the research focused on gaining knowledge in two main areas:

- The process by which Taft-Hartley Fund trustees make decisions about what health plan benefits offer and promote, including tobacco cessation benefits
- Attitudes among union members who use tobacco about the role of the union, employer, and Taft-Hartley Funds in providing and promoting tobacco cessation benefits

Methods

The research partners used two qualitative research methods to collect and analyze data for this study.

- Interviews – 29 in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of Taft-Hartley stakeholders including labor and management trustees, fund attorneys and consultants
- Focus Groups – Four focus groups were conducted with employed union members, all of whom smoked and received benefits from Taft-Hartley Funds

Results

Interviews

- Trustees relied heavily on the expertise of advisors, including attorneys, consultants, actuaries, and administrators, to help inform their decisions on health benefits
- There was a general lack of knowledge among trustees and advisors about public health policy issues and strategies
- Advisors lacked easy access to current, reliable health policy information to base recommendations
- Gaps in knowledge and access to information prevented Taft-Hartley Fund decision-makers from embracing health and wellness initiatives, including tobacco cessation

Focus Groups

- Union members expressed a strong desire for tobacco cessation benefit coverage
- Cost was a perceived barrier to accessing cessation treatment and services
- There was a strong desire among union members to receive health information from employers and health plans about tobacco use and cessation benefits
- Plans should offer a variety of tobacco cessation benefits to support participants’ quit attempts

Conclusions

- Union members see a key role for health plans in supporting their tobacco cessation efforts
- Taft-Hartley decision-makers lack essential information about smoking and cessation coverage
- Advisors are highly influential among Taft-Hartley Fund trustees and can play integral roles in enhancing benefit packages to include cessation coverage
- Additional research is needed to develop effective strategies that encourage fund trustees to adopt and promote comprehensive cessation benefits

About Taft-Hartley Funds

Taft-Hartley Health and Welfare Funds provide health benefits for an estimated 10 million union members, 20 million dependents, and millions of retirees nationwide. These health plans primarily serve blue-collar and service sector workers, a population that shoulders a disproportionate burden of tobacco use. The majority of Taft-Hartley Funds do not provide comprehensive tobacco cessation coverage despite high tobacco use rates among the plan participants.

About WorkSHIFTS

WorkSHIFTS is a collaborative labor outreach program of the Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. Since 2002, WorkSHIFTS has partnered with unions to improve workers’ health by advancing policies that reduce workers’ exposure to secondhand smoke and increase access to comprehensive tobacco cessation benefits.

Funding

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