

CNN: Amtrak Employees Failing Drug, Alcohol Tests at Alarming Rate



A new report blasts Amtrak, the nation's largest passenger rail carrier, for dangerously overlooking drug and alcohol use by its employees.

The report released Thursday, an internal audit by Amtrak's Office of Inspector General, says drug and alcohol use by employees has steadily risen since 2006. The majority of employees who failed drug tests were reported to have tested positive for cocaine and marijuana, according to the report.

Amtrak's employees failed drug and alcohol tests at a staggering 51% higher rate than the rail industry average, the report said. Amtrak officials estimate that they've spent \$1.5 million to screen employees in 2012 alone, but employees have exceeded industry averages failing drug tests in each of the past five years.

Federal regulations requiring railroad companies to implement drug and alcohol testing were put in place after a deadly 1987 Amtrak collision with a freight train in Chase, Maryland. In that accident, investigators concluded that a Conrail freight train engineer was under the influence of marijuana and ran three signals before colliding with the passenger train, killing 16.

Employees in safety-sensitive positions are subject to closer federal regulatory scrutiny when it comes to drug and alcohol testing. But the inspector general's report suggests that Amtrak officials have turned something of a blind eye toward enforcing its own policies for testing employees and complying with regulations.

In a blistering criticism of the role senior management at Amtrak has played in its failure to curtail the problem, the inspector general noted, "Amtrak's current senior management's lack of knowledge about the extent of drug and alcohol use, the lack of engagement in the program, and the limited response to (the Federal Railroad Administration's) concerns about its physical observations raise serious questions about Amtrak's commitment to controlling drug and alcohol use."

Officials are required to physically observe each employee for signs and symptoms of drug and alcohol use once every three months, on average, the report said. Amtrak is required to randomly

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perform drug testing on at least 25% of its employees in safety sensitive positions and alcohol testing on at least 10% of safety-sensitive positioned employees each year.

Employees who are in safety-sensitive positions have maximum hours-of-service regulations and minimum off-duty hour requirements between shifts. Amtrak has more than 4,400 employees who meet those requirements, including locomotive engineers, conductors, train dispatchers, signal maintenance employees and mechanics.

The report suggested a number of ways Amtrak could prevent employees from showing up to work drunk and on illegal drugs. The recommendations include increasing the frequency of drug and alcohol testing, reviewing results and comparing them to industry averages, demonstrating that drug and alcohol control is a priority for Amtrak senior management, improving the physical observation of employees and increased training of supervisors.

Amtrak's Office of Inspector General conducts and supervises audits, inspections, evaluations and investigations for the rail company. It provides reports to customers, the public and Congress. The Amtrak inspector general is responsible for preventing and detecting fraud, waste, abuse and reviewing security and safety policies in agency programs and operations.

2011 was a record year in terms of ridership for Amtrak. It carried nearly 30.2 million passengers, an average of more than 82,000 passengers on 300 trains daily. According to Amtrak, its ridership has increased in eight of the past nine years.

Source:

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