

Shining a Light on Workplace Addiction in a Post-COVID World: Cheryl Brown Merriwether

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September is *National Recovery Month*, which was introduced in 1989 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) to increase awareness surrounding mental health and substance abuse. In honor of this, *Orlando Medical News* sat down with Cheryl Brown Merriwether, Vice President and Executive Director for the International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE) and President of the Greater Orlando Society of Human Resource Management (GOSHRM) to discuss what is happening in the world of addiction & recovery, especially in the workplace, as a result of COVID-19.

Cheryl brings over two decades of experience in corporate HR management, addiction recovery awareness, and adult education to ICARE. Since 2010 she has directed the administration, operations, and student support services for ICARE - She is also the 2021 President of GOSHRM and serves on the Board of Directors for Project Opioid, Central Florida. She is currently leading ICARE's new division, Strategic Sobriety Workforce Solutions™, which provides education, people and processes to help companies avert risk, enhance employee performance and increase addiction awareness.

Q: What is ICARE's mission?

ICARE provides credentialed training programs to solve the growing global problem of substance misuse and addiction by empowering individuals, families, communities, and the workforce. Our programs empower individuals to achieve resiliency and emotional sobriety to live their best lives. By extension these individuals positively impact others within their sphere of influence, which include their families, communities and workplaces. For 25 years we have partnered with national and international organizations to provide training to more than 40,000 people worldwide in 40 nations.

Q: What brought you to ICARE?

Working for ICARE was a divine intervention. Before I became an employee in 2010 I worked for AT&T for 20 years in various HR and operational leadership positions. My professional experience afforded me the opportunity to become an adult educator. On the personal side, I have had many close family members and friends battle substance use disorder (SUD) and addiction. My job at ICARE allows me to bring together both my personal and professional experiences to serve my life purpose, which is to make a difference in the lives of people who are struggling.

Q: Why is Workplace Addiction growing?

Workplace addiction costs US companies over \$740 billion every year due to absenteeism, theft and lost productivity. The National Safety Council reports employers spend an average of \$8,817 per employee with an untreated SUD and that the costs are rising – more than 30% in the last three years.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem and greatly impacted those in the workforce including frontline and remote workers. The death of loved ones and social isolation coupled by disruption of the education system has created stress, anxiety, depression and despair like we have never seen in our lifetime. It's a lingering situation and the culmination has people choosing unhealthy habits to cope such as alcohol and substance misuse. Last year there were more than 93,000 overdoses vs 72,000 in 2019. These numbers are predicted to climb for the foreseeable future.

Q: What is being doing to mitigate Workplace Addiction?

One positive result of COVID is acknowledging that people are hurting and need help. Mental illness often leads to substance misuse and our existing systems of care are not sufficient to meet the demand. HR professionals are paying close attention to employee benefits that include services to identify and address the problem of *workplace addiction*. There's a lot of collaboration between mental health

practitioners and behavioral health practitioners. Health and wellness professionals are working together to educate, raise awareness and find new solutions to prevent and mitigate the problem.

Today there's a willingness to expand traditional systems of care to non-traditional service providers, which opens the door for professional recovery coaches, who are trained in SUD to help people achieve and maintain long-term recovery. AMA recognizes addiction as a medical disease like diabetes that can be treated. To do this we must first destigmatize the concept and begin to have honest conversations. Historically, people have not wanted to talk about addiction. They're afraid, embarrassed, ashamed and fearful of losing their jobs. Fear and stigma have created a "sickness of silence" that causes people to not reach out and ask for help. ICARE's goal is to *break the silence* by creating psychological safety in the workplace around these issues, so people will feel comfortable to ask for help.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are a great resource for employees to access various treatment options, including counselors, therapists and professional recovery coaches, all designed to help employees make healthier choices.

Q: What is ICARE doing to mitigate the problem of addiction?

In October 2019, at the request of several of our graduated professional recovery coaches, we introduced our first ***Certified Facilitator Addiction Awareness*** (CFAA) credentialing program. The class was originally designed to be an instructor-led live training in a lunch and learn format. When COVID hit we evolved it into an online Zoom format.

CFAA is a 14 hour *train the trainer* program broken up into five sessions, designed to help people understand that addiction is a preventable and treatable condition. The course provides attendees with the knowledge and materials needed to deliver a one-hour lunch and learn or webinar within a workplace setting or community group, either live or online.

The program delivers all the information needed to thoughtfully present the information and respond to questions from participants. And once students complete the training, they receive their certification and materials, which they can customize to their audience.

To date ICARE has trained and certified more than 60 facilitators to deliver addiction, awareness, presentations, and workshops. Our diverse student base includes nurses, pilots, HR practitioners, pastoral care givers, government workers and others.

Maura King is senior project manager for CareerSource Central Florida, which provides services to connect career seekers and local businesses. CareerSource recently launched “Fostering Opioid Recovery through Training & Employment (FORTE)” – a four-year initiative focused on engaging businesses and individuals affected by the opioid crisis.

Maura recently earned her CFAA certification in August. “I really appreciated the ability to interact and deeply engage with my fellow class members who share my passion for educating and destigmatizing workplace addiction. There was a strong sense of *psychological safety* that was created within our group over the five-week course. We were able to share challenges and best practices. The course was so brilliantly facilitated and engaging. It was literally the fastest 14 hours of my life!”

To date CFAA has been delivered by certified facilitators 100 times. Once they are certified, the facilitator gets the PowerPoint slides and the supplemental materials, and they're off to the races. Currently CFAA is delivered as a one-hour webinar or lunch and learn. In early 2022 ICARE will begin offering the course as a half day workshop.

Upcoming CFAA Training Dates: (Note: Students must attend the first four sessions to receive credit).

- Thursday, October 7th 11am - 1pm ET
- Thursday, October 21st 11am - 1pm ET
- Thursday, October 28th 11am - 3pm ET
- Thursday, November 4th 10am- 1pm ET
- Thursday, November 11th - 7pm ET (Optional live coaching session)

For more information and to register for ICARE’s upcoming CFAA course visit: <https://icare-aware.org/addiction-awareness-facilitator-training/> or contact Cheryl at Cheryl@icare-aware.org.

Sections: Feature Profiles
