



# Minnesota Counties Intergovernmental Trust Resource Briefing

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## The Employee Assistance Program: Understanding and Using It

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One of MCIT's primary goals is to assist members in identifying risks and mitigating exposures. Anxiety and abusive behavior appearing at the workplace, and deteriorating job performance may be symptoms that an employee is confronting personal problems, such as a relationship issue, financial crisis, separation, divorce, depression, grief, parent or child difficulties, concerns about work, or alcohol or chemical abuse.

When these situations are handled inappropriately or ignored, the potential increases for civil lawsuits and workers' compensation claims. The costs associated with dealing with a difficult employee, the defense of a lawsuit, the cost of legal advice, loss of employee morale and the investment of training new staff were considerations that led MCIT to introduce an employee assistance program (EAP) to reduce and prevent losses.

A well-designed EAP takes an employee's personal problems out of the workplace and appropriately places them in the office of a professional counselor who can provide assistance in resolving them. The result is reduced exposure to litigation and the employee's return to work as a valuable participating member of the team.

An employee assistance program is a worksite-based program designed to help employees identify and resolve problems that impair their performance at work. It is voluntary and designed to assist employees and their family members with difficult personal issues.

The EAP provides:

- training for individuals in the identification and resolution of job performance issues.
- access to confidential assessment and discussions with qualified counselors.
- referrals for treatment depending upon the diagnosis.
- the formation of lines of communication between the workplace and community resources.
- follow-up services for employees.

In 1996 MCIT began contracting with The Sand Creek Group Ltd., a Minnesota behavioral health care corporation, to provide an employee assistance program for MCIT's members as a risk management tool. Sand Creek was chosen for its ability to provide employee assistance counseling in multiple locations to every county in Minnesota, its past experience in providing EAPs to counties, and its willingness to work closely with MCIT to design and deliver a program to meet members' unique needs.

### Success of the Program

The introduction of the EAP had an immediate and positive impact on county budgets. Counties no longer had to maintain a separate line item for an EAP because the service became part of their membership with MCIT.

A study by Susan Herreid, Ph.D., for her doctoral research, explores the risk management benefits of MCIT's employee assistance program. Dr. Herreid's research found a significant reduction in indemnity losses for county members following the introduction of the EAP. Reductions were noted in human rights claims, sexual harassment, disability and gender-related cases. In short, the program works. The EAP helps risk management.

The MCIT employee assistance program is one of a kind. No other Minnesota statewide organization offers its employees or members access to this type of qualified counseling service. The program is innovative and on the cutting edge of risk management because it recognizes that personal problems can have an adverse effect on the workplace.

The MCIT EAP has several benefits:

- It transcends individual county boundaries, allowing greater confidentiality for its users.
- It recognizes that volume-based purchasing is more cost effective than each county negotiating its own contract.
- It ensures that services are consistent and uniform throughout the state.
- It consolidates the administration of the contract, thereby allowing county staff to concentrate on other public policy issues and activities.

Members have access to a much-desired program that individually many could not afford or found difficult to coordinate.

## What the EAP Is and Is Not

This Resource Briefing addresses the most commonly asked questions and should help participants get the most out of the program.

The EAP is not meant to replace an employee's health plan. It is not an insurance program and is not intended to be used for long-term help. The employee assistance program is designed to assist employees in finding available help in dealing with personal problems so that they can stay productive at work.

EAP services must be approved by counselors in the MCIT network to ensure payment by Sand Creek. Sand Creek has developed an extensive network of qualified counselors throughout the state. Service providers are located in every county seat and in high-density population areas for easy access to services. Employees and their dependents who use counselors outside of the network will be responsible for the cost of the services. In these instances, the employee's health insurance plan may offer coverage.

The EAP is not intended for long-term counseling. Rather, it provides short-term assistance that is intended to give employees and their dependents quick access to care and to start the process of resolving personal problems. When the need for long-term care is identified, individuals will be referred to other service providers. Counselors are wary of clients who reframe an issue to solicit additional counseling services. Generally, these individuals will be referred for long-term services.

## Who Can Use the Program?

All full- and part-time employees, including supervisors, managers and elected officials, and their dependents are eligible for assistance through the MCIT employee assistance program. Supervisors and managers are also invited to use the program for consultation regarding work-related situations and for advice to help employees find the help they need.

## How Does It Work?

Eligible participants simply need to call the EAP at 1.800.550.MCIT (6248) to access services. The helpline is answered all day, every day. Emergency cases will be assisted immediately. Helpline hours for nonemergency appointments are 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

**MCIT EAP Helpline**  
1.800.550.MCIT (6248)  
Available all day, every day

All calls to the EAP are confidential within the parameters of state statute. A brief intake of information is conducted by The Sand Creek Group to help match the caller with a local counselor who has the training and experience to address the caller's need.

The Sand Creek Group then calls the provider to pave the way for the employee/dependent to receive the highest level of care. The caller then phones the provider to arrange a counseling time that best suits his or her schedule. Within two working days of the initial telephone contact, an appointment will be offered for the employee/dependent to meet with a professional counselor. This meeting is held away from the employee's worksite and is strictly confidential.

EAP participants have more than 550 counseling locations from which to choose. Individuals seeking services but concerned about using a provider in their hometown or within their community can access anyone of the locations upon request.

All eligible participants may receive up to four counseling sessions per year for each identified problem. If more long-term counseling is necessary, the participant will be referred for additional treatment outside of the EAP service, including chemical dependency rehabilitation.

## What About Confidentiality?

The Sand Creek Group protects the confidentiality of all who seek care through the EAP. No one will know the employee or dependent has used the program unless he or she tells someone. Only in specific cases would the EAP have to report information told to them. Report requirements are specifically and clearly mandated by federal and state law. The situations include:

- abuse of a child.
- abuse of a vulnerable adult.
- when the client is suicidal or threatening to harm another person.

## A Voluntary Program

Most participants in the employee assistance program contact Sand Creek on their own. They know they are experiencing a problem, so they call the EAP for help. MCIT encourages the use of the program for anyone experiencing problems including those that affect work performance.

In about 20 percent of the cases, the employee's supervisor sees a decline in the employee's work performance and may suggest the use of the EAP as a helpful resource, but an employee's use of the program is completely voluntary. The employer's focus should be on job performance and not any potential personal issues affecting performance. If job performance continues to decrease, the supervisor will have to follow through with consequences.

## Supervisor Consultation

Supervisors are in key positions to encourage employees to seek help if they are having problems. Also, supervisors may face circumstances with an individual or the staff as a whole that he or she needs help

handling. When supervisors offer the EAP to an employee or seek advice regarding a difficult workplace situation, they increase the likelihood of positive change for employees and work units.

The EAP offers phone consultation to supervisors to help them sort through concerns and find the best way to respond to employees and manage difficult workplace situations. EAP counselors are available for supervisory coaching throughout the business day. Should a supervisor encounter an emergency or crisis situation after hours or on weekends, a counselor is always available by phone at 1.800.550.MCIT (6248) to assist in the crisis management.

The same confidentiality afforded employees seeking help for personal problems applies to supervisors asking for advice regarding workplace issues. Because of this, human resource professionals in particular may find the coaching services valuable. These employees may have no one else in their organizations with whom they can confidentially discuss circumstances they face on the job.

## Special Services

The Sand Creek Group offers a variety of services in addition to the EAP that are outside of the contract with MCIT. These services are available to members on a fee-for-service basis.

### Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

Critical incident stress debriefings are available to members when a traumatic event affects the workplace. The Sand Creek Group sends a counselor or counselors to the workplace to meet with those who experienced the event and conduct a formal debriefing.

Debriefings greatly decrease post-traumatic stress and help employees cope with the experience. Examples of critical incidents that may require debriefings are death of an employee, traumatic workplace events and injury, robberies, accidents, fires, and natural disasters including tornadoes and floods.

### Organizational Development

Organizational development services include:

- facilitating conflict resolution.
- coaching for executive and supervisory skills.
- training on group skills.

Organizational development can help identify workplace problems with the goal of resolving work-related issues. The intent of these services is proactively and comprehensively to provide organizational developmental needs within a specific work setting.

Organizational development differs from EAP services in that it is focused on concerns playing out in the overall work environment. Identifying these workplace issues can often be multifaceted and complex; therefore, consultation with an organizational development facilitator can help determine the best approach for addressing organizational, employee or workgroup needs.

### Workshops and Seminars

The Sand Creek Group will custom design workshops, seminars and retreats for employee or supervisor training and development. Some popular topics are:

- how to build a positive impact on a workplace culture.
- facing the challenges of change.
- dealing with cumulative stress and its impact.
- managing conflict respectfully and effectively.

- communication skills in the workplace.
- maintaining emotional wellness.

Because Sand Creek trainers have experience working with the public-sector workforce, they can use examples and exercises in their training that are relevant to MCIT members. Should an individual need arise from the training, the EAP offers follow-up assistance.

## Getting the Word Out

Promotion of the EAP is crucial to making sure those who need it know about it. All supervisors, employees and their dependents should have the EAP phone number and know how to access help. Strong promotion of the program and high use of the program go hand in hand.

MCIT, working with The Sand Creek Group, has many opportunities for members to promote this program to their workforce. MCIT provides the following promotional materials:

- EAP awareness brochure for employees
- EAP awareness brochure for department heads, supervisors and managers
- Wall posters (updated annually), available at [MCIT.org/eap.aspx](http://MCIT.org/eap.aspx)
- Payroll stuffers (updated quarterly), available at [MCIT.org/eap.aspx](http://MCIT.org/eap.aspx)

Periodically MCIT offers training on specific areas that include presentations by The Sand Creek Group about the EAP. Sand Creek Group staff trainers are also available at a modest fee to visit a worksite and present both awareness training for employees on the use of the program and supervisor training on how to get the most out of the EAP.

## Managing Risks

The introduction and continued support of this risk management service for MCIT members sets it apart from traditional insurance companies and demonstrates MCIT's commitment to helping members reduce losses. Employees and supervisors are strongly encouraged to use this program.

There is no doubt that troubled employees can jeopardize themselves and the organization. When personal problems distract employees, they become less productive, are more subject to injuries at work and often feel victimized by the employer and co-workers.

The employee assistance program provides employees a place to resolve personal problems and resume their roles in the organization. Everyone benefits from the EAP.

For more information about this program, members should contact Minnesota Counties Intergovernmental Trust at 651.209.6400 or the EAP helpline at 1.800.550.MCIT (6248).

*This Resource Briefing was prepared with the assistance of Gretchen Stein, president, The Sand Creek Group Ltd. (Originally published December 2008)*