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Low rate of positive drug screens stuns some lawmakers

PARKERSBURG-MARIETTA AREA

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CHARLESTON — Fewer than 1 percent of workers in the Parkersburg-Marietta region in risky occupations test positive for illegal drugs — a statistic that stunned some West Virginia lawmakers Monday.

Even so, Letha Haas, program director for the Parkersburg-Marietta Contractors and Trades Education Development Fund, stood by her figures in addressing the Committee on Labor and Workers Safety Issues.

“The expectations are that they remain drug-free and that we’re going to monitor their drug-free status,” Haas said.

Workers who test positive for drugs have three options: either challenge the results at another lab, undergo rehabilitation and be re-tested or sit out employment for an entire year, she explained.

Haas recognized that some offenders resort to various ploys in an effort to beat the test.

“The challenge is to try to stay ahead of the drugs out there,” she said.

“Ways to beat the test and fool the test are the challenges.”

Delegate Randy Smith, R-Preston, was skeptical of the 1 percent positive results, pointing to the rampant drug abuse problem across West Virginia — one described by state and federal authorities as an epidemic.

“I respect your enthusiasm,” he told Haas. “I can’t share it with you. I can tell you right, it’s a good bit more than 1 percent.”

Haas said the results have varied little since her firm has been providing testing fully two decades, working with 510 contractors, for some 70,000 drug screens.

“Our target groups are those that are working in safety-sensitive duties,” she said afterward.

Haas said workers who are prescribed medications don’t face any actions by their employers if the levels of such drugs in their systems are consistent with those ordered by their physicians.

Sens. Daniel Hall, D-Wyoming, and Craig Blair, R-Berkeley, who tried without success in the 2013 session to impose drug testing on anyone getting unemployment and welfare checks, wondered if those rejected under the Parkersburg-Marietta program were eligible for relief.

“It depends on the situation,” Haas said, without elaborating.

Blair said anyone testing positive can apply for unemployment, telling how one of his workers got benefits while he was unaware of the failed drug screen.

“You can apply for unemployment,” Blair said. “That’s the key.”

Anyone taking prescription medicines gets a comparison with the levels a doctor orders, she pointed out. Marijuana is the primary drug of choice, but some abusers have ingested cocaine, amphetamine and oxycodone, Haas said.

“Some just three or four of them at once,” she said.

“The leverage is so high it looks like they’ve taken them just before they went in for the test.”