A White Paper on Employer Education and Workforce Inclusion

Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace Project ECHO Series

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Executive Summary

The opioid crisis presents significant challenges to the workforce, often exacerbated by persistent employment stigma faced by individuals in recovery. This paper details the "Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO" program, a collaborative initiative between the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry and Penn State Project Extension for Community Health Outcomes (ECHO). The program is a model for educating employers about substance use disorder (SUD), best practices for supporting employees in recovery, and fostering inclusive workplaces to address critical workforce needs. Through a multidisciplinary expert (hub) team and interactive educational sessions, the program aimed to dismantle biases and highlight the unique strengths that individuals in recovery bring to the labor force.

Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry

PennState College of Medicine

Project ECHO®

Background

The profound impact of the opioid crisis on Pennsylvania's economy and workforce necessitates comprehensive and innovative solutions. In 2016, the economic cost of Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) to Pennsylvania taxpayers was estimated at $53.77 billion, predominantly due to opioid-related fatalities and lost productivity from individuals with OUD. [1] Individuals aged 25-54 represent a large segment of the workforce and have the highest overdose rates [1]. Barriers to recovery and economic stability faced by individuals with a history of substance use disorder include employer misconceptions regarding reliability, trustworthiness, and perceived relapse risks. [2] Such misconceptions impede the re-entry of capable individuals into the workforce and limit opportunities for employers to engage dedicated, empathetic, and resilient employees. Recognizing these challenges, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry has adopted a holistic training strategy for employers to de-stigmatize hiring persons in recovery. "Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO" program is a key component of that effort, providing employers access to expert insights and practical strategies for fostering a more recovery-friendly workplace.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry partnered with Project ECHO at Penn State College of Medicine to develop and offer the "Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO" to Pennsylvania employers. The development and delivery of this program was funded by the U.S. Department of Labor through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) National Dislocated Worker Grant (NDWG) to Address the Opioid Crisis to create a supportive co-learning environment for employers and individuals affected by the opioid crisis.

Barriers to recovery and economic stability faced by individuals with a history of substance use disorder

- Employer misconceptions regarding reliability
- Employer misconceptions regarding trustworthiness
- Employer misconceptions regarding perceived relapse risks

Approach

Examinining Program Design and Implementation

01 Project ECHO Overview

Project ECHO is an evidence-based tele-education model recognized for its effectiveness in knowledge transfer and capacity building, particularly in underserved populations.[3] The model operates through a hub-and-spoke knowledge-sharing network (Figure 1), where expert specialist teams (the "hub") provide mentorship and education to community providers or employers (the "spokes") leveraging the Zoom platform.

This interactive learning model utilizes focused presentations with clear learning objectives and real-world case-based discussions, creating a dynamic learning loop that promotes rapid knowledge dissemination and implementation of best practices. Project ECHO at Penn State College of Medicine has been working over the past 5 years to address SUD in Pennsylvania and has successfully conducted 30 SUD ECHO programs focused on educating clinicians, health workers, school staff, community members, and employers.

02 Hub Team

The multidisciplinary panel of experts on the ECHO hub team included an addiction medicine physician, a social worker specializing in addiction, a human resources vice president, a labor law specialist (cohort 2), and an adult probation officer (cohort 1). The experts on the hub team represented the many facets between work and health, allowing a holistic exploration of supporting employees in recovery. The "Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO" integrated clinical expertise through the inclusion of an addiction medicine physician, providing attendees with medical insights into SUD and recovery processes, a dimension often missing in traditional HR or workforce training.

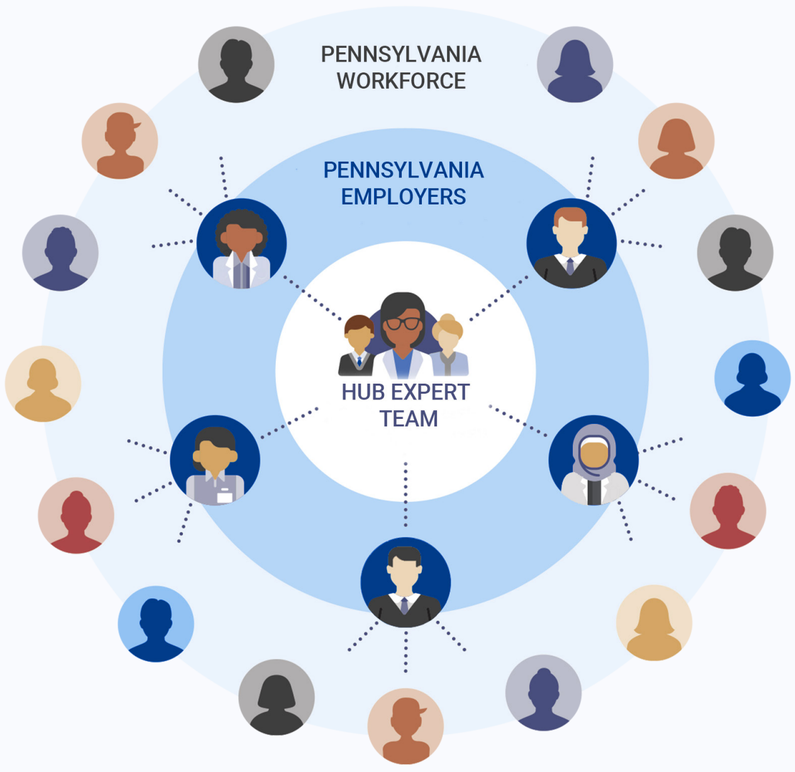

Figure 1: Shatter the Stigma Project ECHO hub-and-spoke Model

03 Curriculum and ECHO Session Structure

The “Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO” program delivered a comprehensive curriculum designed to equip employers with the knowledge and tools necessary to support employees in recovery. The program held two consecutive series (Cohort 1: August – December 2024 and Cohort 2: February – May 2025), each consisting of eight ECHO sessions to maximize employers’ ability to attend.

ECHO sessions were designed to provide practical guidance on reducing stigma, improving workplace well-being, and support employee recovery [4]. The curriculum for both cohorts included the following session topics:

1. Recovery Story
2. Concerns with Medication-Assisted Treatment
3. Drug Screens
4. Methadone & Levels of Recovery
5. Hiring do’s & don’ts and HR Policies
6. Recovery-Friendly Workplaces
7. PA CareerLink® Services
8. Stigma & Bias

Each ECHO session was 60-minutes in length and followed the typical ECHO model format:

- **Introductions (5 min)** : Provided an inviting atmosphere.
- **Didactic Presentations (15 min)** : Hub experts delivered a flash-talk on the session topic and participants had electronic access to all materials.
- **Case Presentations (35 min)** : Each session included 1-2 case presentations and case-based discussion to ensure mastery of content and skills. During case presentations, all employers were encouraged to ask clarifying questions and weigh in on recommendations. The hub team then provided advice on addressing each case using best practices.
- **Close and Debrief (5 min)** : The hub team summarized the topic and encouraged participants to put into practice what they learned.

Opening Session: Recovery Story

The first session of each cohort featured a Recovery Story, a lived experience shared by a person in recovery. The speaker, now a hiring manager, offered a practical perspective and the important role of employers in supporting employees in recovery.

04 Program Recruitment and Participants

The program engaged 22 workforce development areas across the commonwealth whose Business Services Teams and Title I staff were instrumental in recruiting employers to participate. [5] Additionally, the Department of Labor and Industry ran social media posts and press releases, partnered with the PA Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) to encourage attendance and shared with the general assembly.

Attendees of the "Shatter the Stigma" ECHO program (ECHO "spokes") were management, human resource and other staff professionals across 54 Pennsylvania counties (n=313) and had representation from all 22 of the PA workforce development areas These employers represented the following industries: nonprofit (34%), healthcare (21%), government (15%), manufacturing (8%), education (5%), trade (2%), hospitality (1%), banking (1%), and food services (1%).

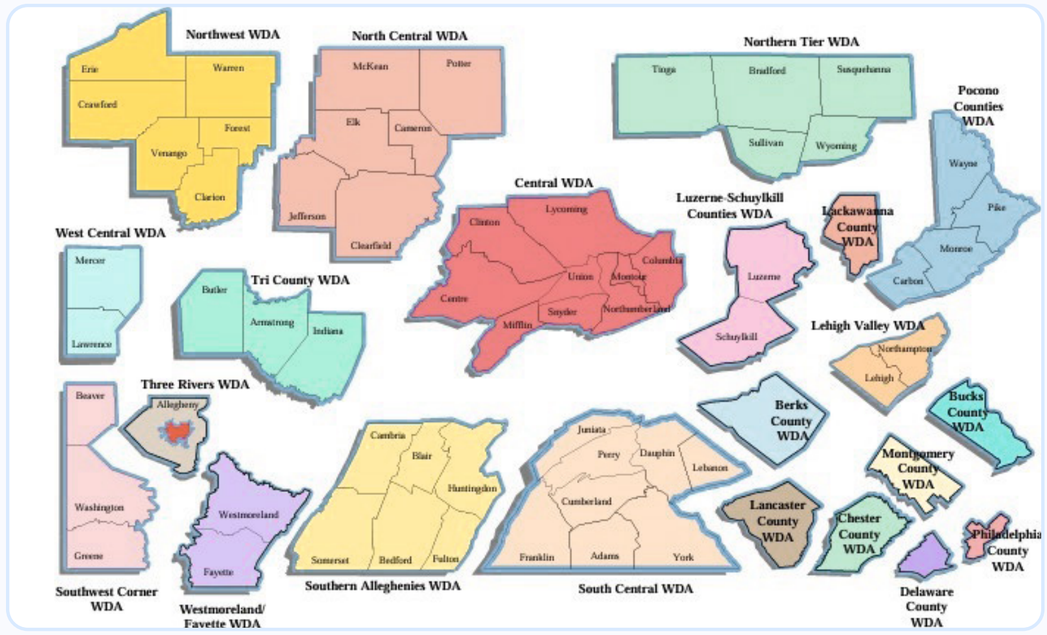

Figure 2: Pennsylvania Workforce Development Areas

05 Program Evaluation

To assess the ECHO program, participant evaluation data was collected at registration (baseline), after each ECHO session (post-session), and at the end of the ECHO program (post-program). Program data were collected and managed using REDCap electronic data capture tools hosted at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center and Penn State College of Medicine. [6] A total of 679 ECHO session evaluations were collected for the 16 sessions across both cohorts, and 76 final program evaluations were collected.

Program at a Glance

Program Model:
Project ECHO (hub-and-spoke tele-education)

Delivery Format:
Live, virtual sessions via Zoom

Program Structure:
Two cohorts; eight sessions per cohort

Session Length:
60 minutes per session

Curriculum Focus:
Employer education on SUD, recovery, and work-place support

Expert Hub Team:
Multidisciplinary specialists spanning health, HR, law, and workforce systems

Participant Audience:
Employers and workforce professionals across Pennsylvania

Employer Learning and Practice Outcomes

Knowledge, Skills, and Workplace Intent

The “Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO” program aimed to enhance Pennsylvania Employer knowledge, improve employer’s capacity to support employees and coworkers in recovery, and initiate positive changes in workplace practices. Evaluation data demonstrate the ECHO program’s success in each aim.

Employers reported a 31% average increase in knowledge across session topics (Figure 3), with the largest knowledge gained in understanding methadone treatment (50%), and stigma and bias (35%). When assessing employer confidence in real world skills to support employees in recovery pre- and post-ECHO program, data show a median change of + 0.7 and increases across all skills (Figure 4). The largest increases were seen in employer’s understanding of limitations and accommodations for employees in recovery (change of +1.2) and employer’s understanding of legal issues surrounding substance use and recovery (change of + 0.9).

Percent **increase** in participant's knowledge of the session topic

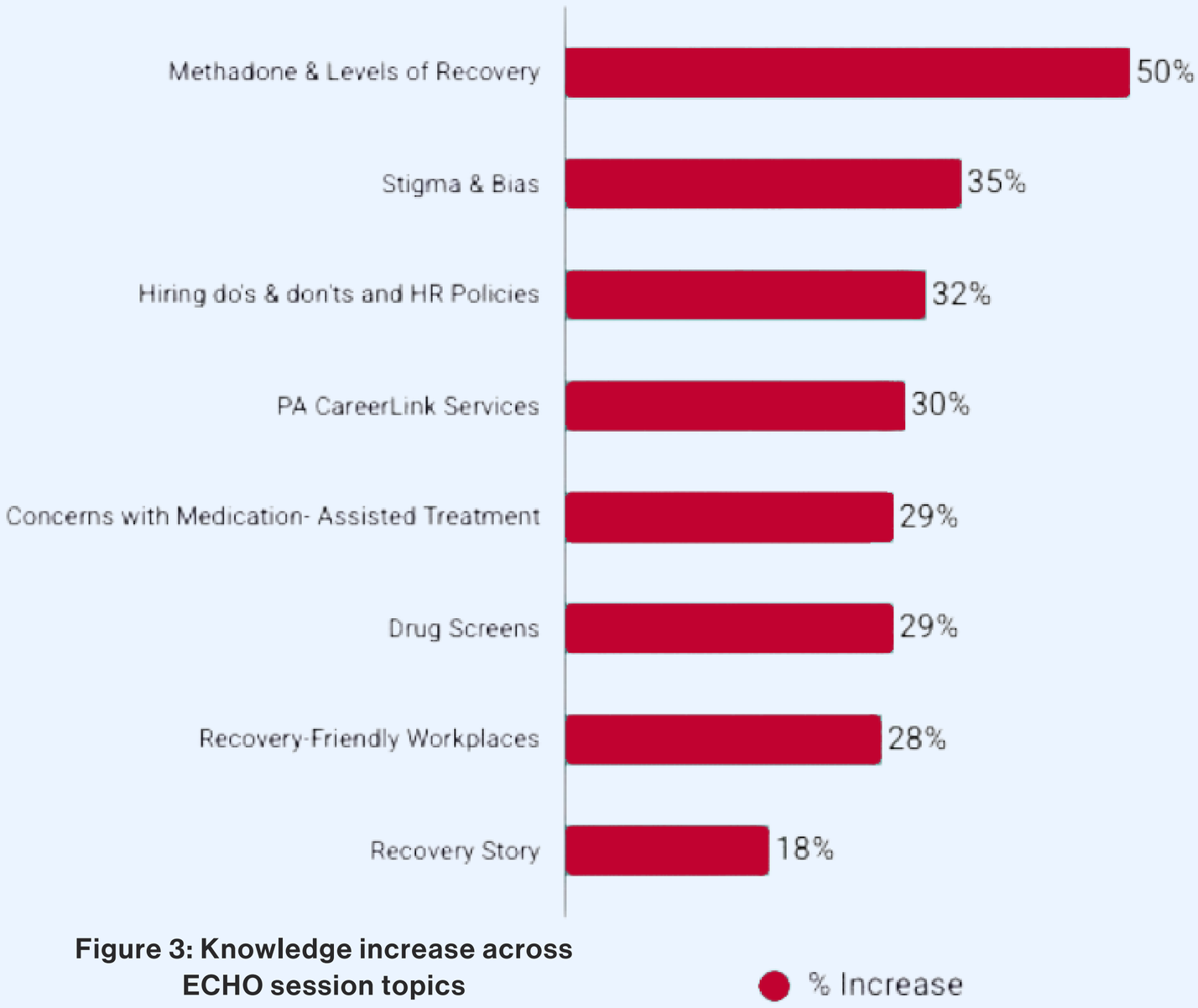

Figure 3: Knowledge increase across ECHO session topics

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge on the session's topic before and after each ECHO session using a scale of 1-5.

1 = Not at all knowledgeable

5 = Extremely knowledgeable

31%

Average increase in employer knowledge across topics

41% Nearly half of employers were more likely to hire someone in recovery after attending the ECHO program.

No respondents indicated they were less likely to hire someone in recovery after attending the ECHO program. Overall, employers reported increased knowledge (88%), improved ability to provide support to employees/coworkers (82%), and intention to make changes in their work (60%).

Participant's **confidence before** and **after** the ECHO Program

Participants were asked to rate their confidence on these statements before and after attending the ECHO program using a scale of 1-5.

1 = Not at all confident

5 = Very confident

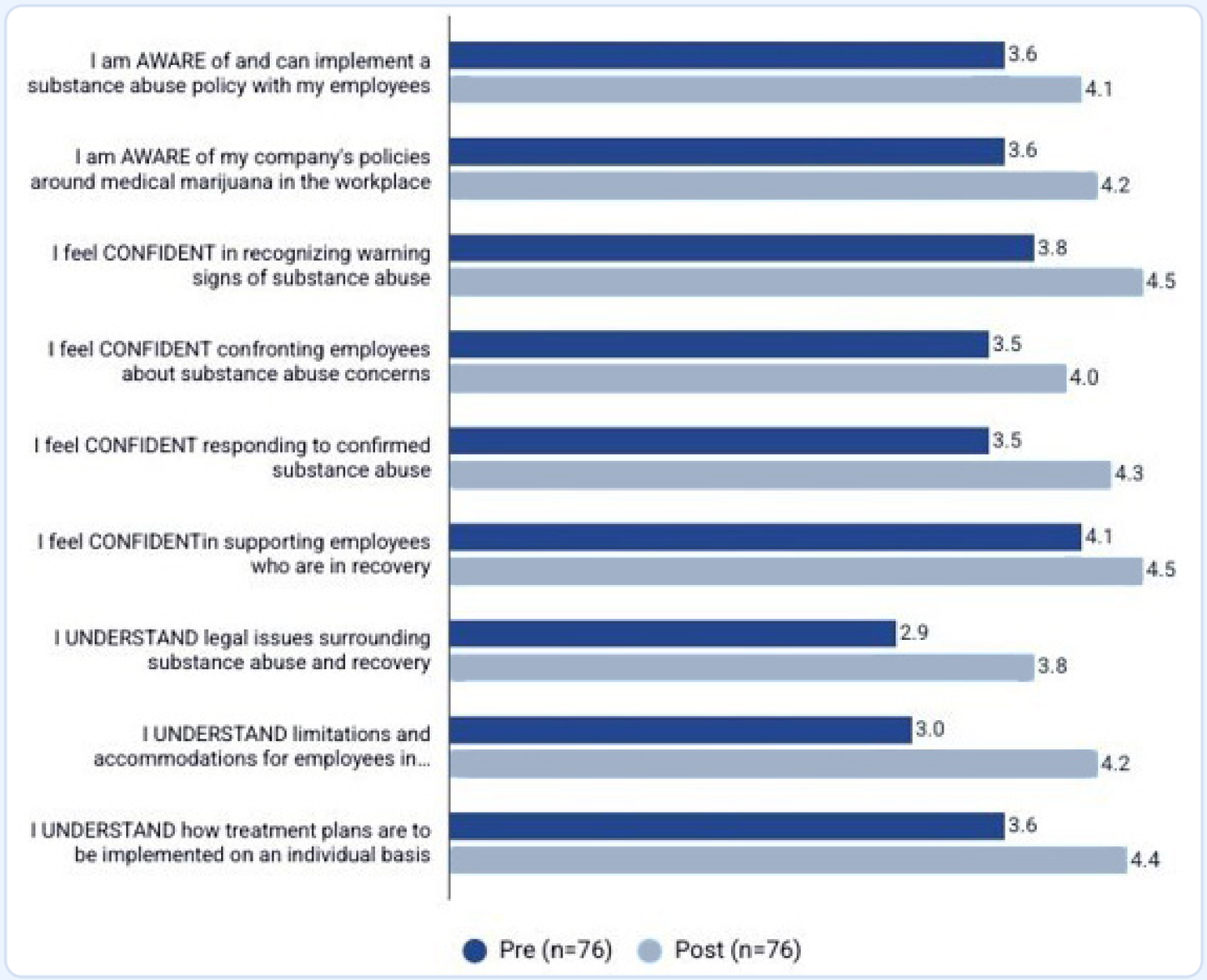

Figure 4: Skill-based confidence increase across ECHO Program

Perceptions of Project ECHO

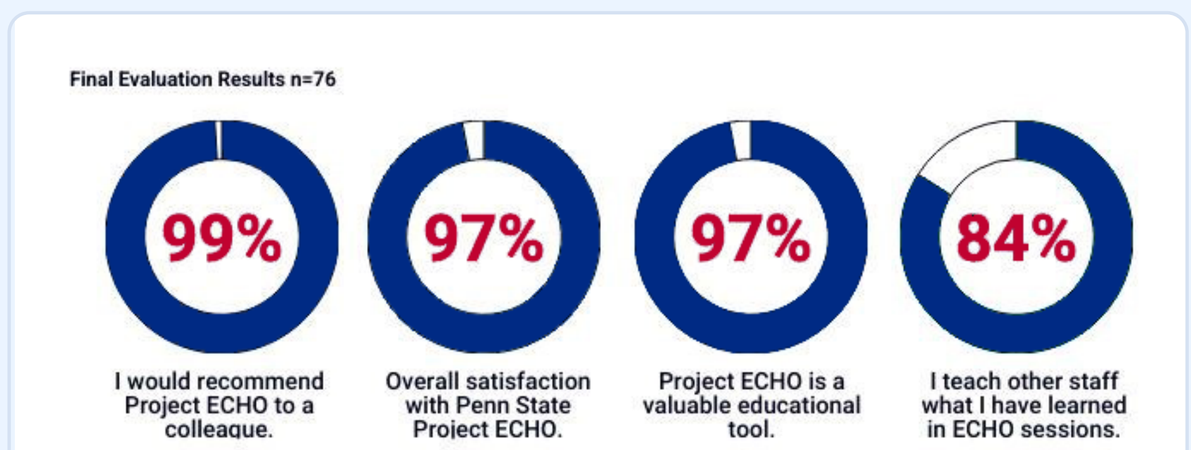

Figure 5: Employer perceptions of Project ECHO

Nearly all employers (99%) participating in the Shatter the Stigma program would recommend Project ECHO to a colleague, were satisfied with Project ECHO (97%), found it to be a valuable educational tool (97%), and reported they would teach other staff what they had learned in the ECHO sessions (84%).

Employers consistently highlighted the value of hearing both the medical explanations and practical guidance on real world situations from the hub team, a key differentiator of the ECHO program with the inclusion of an addiction medicine physician on the expert hub team. Additional employer feedback included feeling *"more equipped to understand some of the different signs of substance use disorder and ways I can support and accommodate individuals in recovery"* and that Project ECHO *"provided information to help dispel myths, provide applicable strategies, and provide excellent resources"*.

Workforce Transformation Through Recovery-Ready Practices

Employer Education via the ECHO Model

Reducing Stigma in Hiring Practices

Building Recovery-Ready Workplaces

Conclusion

The "Shatter the Stigma: Supporting Recovery in the Workplace ECHO" program represents an effective model for addressing the intersection of the opioid epidemic and workforce development in Pennsylvania. By leveraging the evidence-based ECHO model, this initiative has successfully educated employers, reduced bias in the hiring process for persons in SUD recovery, and provided practical tools and advice to navigate the complexities of supporting persons in recovery. Employers who demonstrate an openness to hiring persons in recovery frequently report a profound shift in perspective, recognizing that these employees often bring unique strengths to the workplace, including enhanced empathy, exceptional work ethic, and remarkable dedication. [2] The Project ECHO program's multidisciplinary approach, particularly its integration of clinical expertise, powerful lived experiences, and workforce experts is an important step toward dismantling employment stigma and creating more inclusive and supportive workplaces.

Employer Education via the ECHO Model

The program leveraged the evidence-based ECHO model to equip employers with practical knowledge and guidance for supporting individuals in recovery.

Reducing Stigma in Hiring Practices

By addressing misconceptions related to substance use disorder, the program supported reductions in hiring bias.

Building Recovery-Ready Workplaces

Through multidisciplinary expertise and lived experience, the program supported inclusive and recovery-ready workplaces.

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Get in Touch

For more information about Project ECHO or the Shatter the Stigma program, please visit our website or contact the Project ECHO team.

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