

History of District 141 Employee Assistance Program

(Excerpted from Employee Assistance Program Certification: Leveling the Playing Field For Union Peer Coordinators by Al Abromitis)

In 1972, UAL aircraft mechanics Bill Combs and Harold Mamola, both IAM DL141 members, received a grant from the state of California to establish a labor/management alcohol recovery program at the Oakland, California aircraft maintenance base. DL141 established a joint EAP with UAL the following year. Under the guidance of former director Combs, the fledgling EAP spread over time to other job classifications represented by DL141. The broad brush EAP concept which expanded services for other problems unrelated to alcohol went into effect in 1978. In addition to director Combs (retired), the DL141 EAP further developed under the direction of Regis Wasiecko (retired) and current director Rudy Asuncion. Today, the DL141 EA program covers members at all represented employers and is capable of operating with or without company cooperation or participation.

On March 3, 1986, DL141 and UAL signed a letter of agreement (LOA) clarifying procedures for administering EAP services at UAL in a joint labor/management setting (Schroeder & Samolis, 1986). Highlights of the agreement included separation of EAP from the discipline process, the establishment of two full time union EAP coordinator positions paid by the company, positive space business travel for full-time coordinators, and annual training for IAM coordinators paid by the company. While the LOA does not cover every situation that arises in day to day EAP operations, it adequately addresses our major concerns and has not been opened for renegotiation since its inception.

From its beginning as a union-sponsored occupational alcohol program to its present status as a joint labor/management program, the DL141 EAP employs the volunteer peer

coordinator as the first contact with troubled members. The union EAP recruits volunteers for the peer coordinator role wherever they work. Prospective candidates undergo an application and interview process after which they serve in a probationary status for six to twelve months before appointment to a 2-year term (DL141 EAP, 2005, p. 28). Due to its sensitive nature, the EAP coordinator role remains non-political. Peer coordinators are appointed, not elected. The DL141 president and directing general chairperson appoints peer coordinators based on ability, qualification, and EAP recommendation rather than being elected by the membership based on popularity, or political acumen. Appointment rather than election removes EAP coordinators from the political process at their local lodges and ensures approachability and availability to the entire membership at large regardless of who is in elective office.

Prior to 1993, DL141 peer coordinators at UAL referred most employee contacts to the company EAP representative for evaluation and referral. In their role as the eyes and ears of EAP in the workplace, whenever a member needed assistance, coordinators usually referred the member to a company EAP representative for evaluation rather than directly to an appropriate community resource. The status quo changed on February 12, 1993 when UAL eliminated the company EAP as part of a general downsizing of the company to save money (Capital Air Lodge 1759, 1993, p. 2). It was a time of airline industry turmoil and there is little official documentation available publicly concerning the corporate elimination of the EAP. While the company may have failed to mention EAP's elimination in any of its press releases regarding downsizing, documentation is available in the archives of several IAM local lodge newsletters published during the period. The DL141 EAP responded to UAL's action "In the tradition they pioneered in the airline industry many years ago (Capital Air Lodge 1759, p. 2)" by continuing EAP services not only to DL141 members but to any UAL employee who asked for help.

According to current UAL EAP manager Ken Fox (personal communication, January 10, 2008) the company reinstated the EA program in October, 1994. During the twenty month interim of no company involvement in services, several DL141 staff members and coordinators studied for and passed the written examination for certified employee assistance professional accreditation. This action effectively leveled the playing field for DL141 interaction with the newly reinstated company EAP. As a result of certification, most UAL representatives in the resurrected company EAP accepted certified DL141 members as professionals and equals in the EA field. Essentially, our members now had a choice of services. If DL141 members did not want the company involved in their personal affairs, they could get a general assessment and referral to an appropriate resource from the union EAP. In addition, members could choose to access the company EAP and bypass the union, or work with both entities jointly. Keeping pace with advances in the EAP field and staying in the vanguard of EAP core technology is in the best interest of our members, the IAM, and UAL. By leveling the playing field through education and the certification process, the union not only increased the legitimacy and professionalism of the DL141 EAP itself; it also ensured that the DL141 program has an equal seat at the table whenever EAP issues at UAL are discussed.

The DL141 joint program at UAL is recognized in the EAP community as one of the top-rated EAPs in the country. The Employee Assistance Professionals Association recently acknowledged the success of the program at their October, 2007 Annual World Conference by presenting DL141 and UAL with the Ross Von Weigand Award as the best labor/management EA program in the industry (EAPA, 2008). This is the second time the DL141 EAP received this award with UAL. The first award was in 1981.