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Indian Point security guards test positive for coke

By Abby Luby

Last week two security guards tested positive for cocaine at the Indian Point nuclear power plants in Buchanan. The incident comes just a month after an on-site construction company supervisor tested positive for alcohol.

Despite the emphasis on security since 9/11, the industry hasn't been able to lessen drug and alcohol use at nuclear facilities.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal oversight agency for the nuclear industry nationwide, tracks trends in employee drug use, said NRC spokesperson Neil Sheehan.

"If we saw a spike in the number of positive test results, we would want to know," he said. "It's interesting that the numbers tend to hold steady over the years. Industry wide, marijuana is always number one and the number of positive hits for that is pretty consistent."

Robyn Bentley, spokesperson for Entergy Nuclear, the owner of the plant, said the two guards didn't work together and were tested at different times during the week. The guards are now on paid leave for two weeks. If employees test positive for drugs or alcohol twice they are fired.

"These are not new employees. They've worked here for several years," said Bentley.

One guard who tested positive for cocaine had just returned from military duty. Company policy says that any employee away from the plant for 30 days or more has to be tested for drugs and alcohol as part of Entergy's "Fitness for Duty" program.

The other security guard was a woman who didn't respond to a regular radio check. Bentley said her post was vacant when guards sought her out.

"She was found in the bathroom with flu-like symptoms," she said. "We tested her urine and it showed positive for cocaine."

The names of the guards couldn't be released, said Bentley, adding that there were no criminal charges. Bentley said that the guards will take part in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a county program which counsels and treats people with drug addictions.

Pamela Jones-Brice is the Director of the EAP for Westchester County. The agency not only counsels addicts but also gives advice to government employers on how to deal with substance abusers.

Jones-Brice said sometimes there are clear signals that a person is using drugs.

"I often caution managers about workers who are missing in action," she said. "A person comes into work, someone saw them but nobody knows exactly where they are."

Other issues could be declining job performance or difficulties making decisions or using poor judgment, she said.

In both of the employees' cases, Entergy's "Fitness for Duty Program" is meeting its objectives, said Sheehan.

"The company acted very quickly and is addressing it," he said. "Although the two guards represent a very small portion of the 1300 workers at Indian Point, it doesn't make it any less unacceptable."

According to NRC reports, a total of 414 random drug tests were performed on Indian Point employees from July 2007 to December 2007. Of those, two outside contractors tested positive for cocaine, and both were denied access to the site for three years.

Routine tests are run on new employees and on employees whose behavior is considered suspicious.

Bentley said since these last two employees tested positive for cocaine, Entergy might step up their random drug tests at the plant.

"There is a possibility that we might do it, but if we do, we're not announcing it," she said.

Michael Kaplowitz, Westchester County Legislator for Somers, Yorktown and New Castle who has long opposed the continued operation at Indian Point, said that security guards using cocaine was unacceptable.

"You have to make sure that each and every employee at every moment at a nuclear facility is of sound mind and body," she said. "Clearly that wasn't the case. Those of us that are critical [of the plant] cannot be amazed – it's just been a series of the same thing."

Bentley said that Entergy's Fitness for Duty program is robust, adding that three Entergy employees at the plant are in charge of testing and processing the paperwork.

"They probably spend about one day a week total on the work," she said. "People are pulled off a job to be tested depending on whether their shifts can be covered. Some employees, like operators, can't leave their posts as easily as security or maintenance crews."

Kaplowitz holds that Entergy, a utility company that makes \$700 million a year, is not getting what they are paying for in terms of quality service.

"They are not getting the best and therefore we're not getting the best," he said. "As a public official that's disappointing to hear. Entergy doesn't want to have a dangerous operation. They're the ones that are at ground zero and if something went wrong everybody is at risk."