



national association of addiction treatment providers

PRESS RELEASE

The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers (NAATP) responds to nationally syndicated columnists

A recent hearing before the United States Supreme Court provides opportunity for columnist to marginalize persons treated for addiction

Lancaster, PA, October 17, 2003: A recently published column in the **Chicago Tribune** and syndicated across the country uses the recent hearing before the U.S. Supreme Court as an opportunity to suggest that persons discharged for their addiction and having received treatment should not be rehired. The National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers issues this open letter as a response to that column.

The October 12, 2003 column written by Steve Chapman, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* titled **ADA should not Protect People with Substance-abuse Problems**, is a not very thinly veiled attempt to describe persons with the disease of addiction as persons, “whose problems are largely self-inflicted”. Would the same logic used by Mr. Chapman apply to diabetics who ignore the best advice from their health care professionals and dangerously raise their blood sugar levels by eating foods known to contain excessive high levels of sugar? Would Mr. Chapman also suggest that persons with high blood pressure who do not exercise or watch their diet and who are in danger of the sudden onset of a stroke or heart attack are persons, “whose problems are largely self-inflicted”? Would Mr. Chapman suggest that such persons are not also a danger on the job in risking sudden onsets of diabetic comas or heart attacks and thus pose a worksite risk equal to anything imaginable by anyone who has been treated for addiction? At issue, is whether Mr. Chapman is genuinely concerned about workplace safety and workplace security, or whether Mr. Chapman is more interested in perpetuating a myth that addiction is not a disease and is the result of persons, “whose problems are largely self-inflicted”.

Using the recent presentation before the United States Supreme Court (*Raytheon Company v. Joel Hernandez* – October 8, 2003), Mr. Chapman argues that the American Disabilities Act (ADA) should not be used to protect persons in the workplace who, “prefer not to take responsibility for their own actions”. The consistent language used in this column is that of bad people doing self-inflicting bad things. Is this the way that we describe persons suffering from other diseases? The case now before the United States Supreme Court focuses on the ability of a company (in this case Raytheon Company) to have a policy that makes it impossible to hire an individual who has previously been discharged from a position because of their use of alcohol or an illegal drug, even if they have been treated for their addiction and continue to have their disease managed by health care professionals. The case at point is one where Joel Hernandez, formerly employed by the Hughes Company, now owned by Raytheon Company,



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was discharged from his position because of his use of alcohol and other drugs. Following that discharge, Mr. Hernandez received treatment for his addiction and is now seeking to be re-employed by the Raytheon Company. However, Raytheon's policy is not to rehire individuals who have been let go for what the company terms "misconduct". If you strip aside all of the hype and hyperbole, there can be only two conclusions from the position taken by the Raytheon Company and by Mr. Chapman in his October 12, 2003 column:

1. That even though addiction is a disease, it is appropriate to discriminate against persons with addictive disease disorders in ways that are not appropriate for persons with other diseases, or
2. That addiction is not a disease and that all the best science of the past fifty years and the best research on responding to this disease has not impacted the widely held public perception that what has been called addiction is really people, "whose problems are largely self-inflicted".

Rather than use the October 8, 2003 United States Supreme Court hearing as a platform to propagate discrimination, we should more honestly use the occasion to answer the question in some unequivocal fashion as to whether or not addiction is a disease and whether or not it should be treated, respected and its treatment paid for in a manner consistent with other diseases. The heart of the issues is whether it will be tolerable to continue to speak about this disease and the persons with this disease as persons, "whose problems are largely self-inflicted"? Self-inflicted is a cruel and discriminating phrase, and one that should be used sparingly. Do we use this phrase for other chronic diseases?

Finally, Mr. Chapman missed the point in his column in that this case before the United States Supreme court is about the ability of a company to discriminate against a classification of individuals. It is not about the right of a company to individually evaluate the qualifications, the reliability and the value that an individual would or would not bring to a company. Raytheon Company has the right to make the best individual decisions that are in the best interests of the company. What is being challenged is their ability to discriminate against a classification of individuals without looking at them individually! Borrowing from the language of Mr. Chapman, would you not feel better knowing that a company was individually looking at your qualifications as opposed to eliminating your access to positions based on a disease classification you may have?