

HIMS Chairman Guidelines

1. Educate managers and the pilot group about your HIMS program. One of the biggest ongoing requirements is the education of managers, peer monitors, union representatives, the pilot group, and others about the disease of chemical dependency and the HIMS program. Educational efforts can include such things as new hire pilot presentations, operations manager presentations, recurrent training modules, newsletters, brochures, articles for union publications, committee meetings, and attendance at national training seminars. This educational process is the cornerstone of a well-supported and effective program.

2. Be familiar with HIMS case history at your airline. Past practice is a very important factor in determining the disposition of current cases and the flexibility you have to create a best possible outcome. Most managers are not inclined to take inordinate risk when dealing with a HIMS case, and most use past practice as a guide when developing their options. Additionally, company legal departments often prefer “black and white” policies because they are easier to administer and easier to defend. The reality, however, is that most HIMS cases are not black and white. Almost every case has some unique aspect or combination of factors that influence its disposition. As HIMS Chairman, part of your job is to use the circumstances of past cases to help ensure your current pilot’s opportunities are maximized. That means using a past case as an example when it benefits the pilot, or using the unique aspects of the current case to create a better opportunity than what would be achievable through a more generalized approach.

3. Try to achieve incremental improvements to your program. Opportunities will arise that will allow you to make improvements to your program. Such events might take the form of formal negotiations. Or, you may get a new manager who is positively predisposed toward the HIMS program either from personal experience or by your educational efforts. You may also have a case involving a pilot who is well liked and the company may choose to be more lenient than usual. Or, you may observe a change in a policy at another airline that can be used as a benchmark to try and achieve a similar policy at your carrier. An important element of your job is to find these opportunities and then seek to codify the improvements in your own program. Realize that events may also work against you and individual managers, cases, or industry trends may threaten the policies you have in place. In those cases, do your best to keep your most enlightened policies and wait for better days. Lastly, remember that these ebbs and flows aren’t personal. They are part of the “tide” of this industry and of life. Do your best to work with that reality. When conditions are favorable, it is also usually more effective to seek incremental improvement than it is to seek a change that is large or extraordinary. Setting an excessive goal gives managers in your company the option of ignoring your request simply because it is unrealistic.

4. Keep the focus of your program on recovery. As HIMS Chairman you should design your program and make choices which support the recovering pilot but that are not enabling. Sometimes circumstances will be such that this choice is extremely difficult. In one situation I was informed of a relapsed pilot who was “holed up” in a layover hotel, had called in sick, and had been drinking for 4 days. If the company were informed of this situation, the pilot would almost surely be terminated. However, I also knew the company would provide relapse treatment for the pilot and that such treatment was the best option for returning him to sobriety. Of course, some union members expressed an interest in trying to handle the situation without company involvement. My choice was to call the company. I made this decision because I thought it preserved the integrity of the program, the trust I’d built with management, and was the pilot’s best chance for recovery although it would probably cost him his job. I’m happy to say the story ends well. The pilot was retreated and is now sober, the pilot credits the HIMS committee and the company managers with saving his life, and due to some additional unusual circumstances

and an enlightened view by company managers, the pilot will retain his job. This is a great outcome, but my decision would have been the same even if the pilot had been terminated. Put the HIMS program and “recovery” first in your decision process, and you will be performing the best possible service to present and future chemically dependent pilots.

5. Develop a close working relationship with other union resources but maintain good boundaries. It is extraordinarily important to work closely with other committee leaders and union resources. Just as you are the expert on HIMS and recovery related matters, other union members are experts in representational or legal issues. Almost every HIMS case has a legal element related to a pilot’s “rights.” Contract Administration and union lawyers are the experts in this area and you should work closely with them to ensure you operate in concert. However, you should also be clear that you will not serve in a representational capacity. Invariably, trying to “wear two hats” will result in a future problem where someone will maintain you did a poor job at representation. So, do your job, and let other people do theirs. You will also find it beneficial to develop a good relationship with other committees such as Pilot Assistance, Aeromedical, and Professional Standards. Sooner or later you’ll have related interests and a good relationship with these other committee Chairmen will help keep your HIMS priorities in focus.

6. Communicate with your assessing physician. In many exchanges between union members and outside authorities communication is tightly controlled. Such control is understandable in that a misstatement might result in sanctions that might otherwise be avoided. However, chemically dependent people also attempt to control communications in order to misrepresent reality and avoid scrutiny. One area that has a critical need for accurate information is the assessment process. The assessing physician needs to know any information that may be related to a pilot meeting diagnostic criterion. Unfortunately, addictive disease behavior includes hiding facts, providing miss-information, and manipulation of data. To help the assessing doctor make an accurate diagnosis, it’s very important to provide him the information you know. It is not necessary to validate sources. It is only necessary to make the physician aware of the circumstances and facts, as you know them. It will be up to the physician to determine if the information is valid and medically significant. One should also ensure, of course, that such medical information is used to ensure proper treatment and not used to discipline the pilot.

7. Spend time with your company managers. As previously mentioned, education and building a good relationship with managers are two essential elements of a strong HIMS program. Opportunities to have formal consultations and training are limited, so try to create informal opportunities when possible. Just stopping by the Chief Pilot Office when flying a trip can create one such informal opportunity. It is surprising how often questions will come up about a particular pilot, or discussions will occur about program policies. In these cases, not only will the manager receive some valuable information, but also he will become increasingly comfortable with working with you. Developing a strong relationship at this management level has great short-term and long-term benefits.

8. Maintain a healthy attitude toward your volunteer work. HIMS work is service work. You will benefit from your participation in the program, but that participation will also create demands on your time and energy. Do your best to place a healthy limit on your commitment. No program will ever be “perfect,” so set realistic goals on what you can achieve and do. Also, remember that it’s not your program. In the end, someone else will one day lead the program you lead, so do your best to create a program that will survive well without you.

Chris Storbeck
ALPA National HIMS Chairman