

Contractors Grapple With Employee Suicide Risk

The construction industry is increasingly incorporating suicide prevention measures within health and safety programs.

By: [Katie Kuehner-Hebert](#) | November 4, 2015 • 5 min read

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Though it may come as a surprise to some, the construction industry is among the top nine occupations with the highest risk for suicide, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“The construction industry tends to employ a lot of what we call “double jeopardy men” — men with a number of suicide risk factors who are also the least likely to see help on their own,” said Sally Spencer-Thomas, co-founder and chief executive of the Carson J Spencer Foundation in Denver.

The foundation, in partnership with Denver construction firm RK Mechanical Inc. and the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, in September jointly released a suicide prevention guide, “A Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace.”

“Employers are learning to make suicide prevention a priority within their health and safety initiatives,” Spencer-Thomas said. “In shifting from reaction to prevention, company leaders become far more proactive in providing skill-based training, linking distressed employees to helpful resources, are creating a culture of care.”

“It’s the quiet ones you have to worry about slipping through the cracks.” — Cal Beyer, director of risk management, Lakeside Industries Inc.

According to the guide, construction workers are also at higher risk for suicide because they have access to and familiarity with lethal means like firearms, pills and high places, and are often less afraid and more capable of self-inflicted harm by these means.

The construction workplace also tends to have a culture of recklessness, bravery and/or stoicism, in which people are rewarded for being tough and thus, are often less likely to reach out and ask for help.

Construction workers also have increased exposure to physical strain or psychological trauma; a culture of substance abuse; exposure to isolation if they work on temporary out-of-town projects; and increased exposure to humiliation if they fail on their job, among other risks.

The guide recommends that construction firms should instill a culture that promotes the importance of safety; emphasizes teamwork; increases employee engagement and connectedness; values mental health; provides access to insurance and mental health care, such as those through employee

assistance programs; provides informational support systems, such as buddy systems; and provides leadership and supervisor training.

“It’s the quiet ones you have to worry about slipping through the cracks,” said Cal Beyer, director of risk management at Lakeside Industries Inc. in Issaquah, Wash. “At our firm, we’ve adopted a safety 24/7 culture, teaching safety at home, work and play. Safety is a core value for us, and mental health and suicide prevention 24/7 is just as important.”

The topic of suicide used to be taboo in the industry, Beyer said.

“We used to talk about mental health awareness, but construction managers and field supervisors said that was too amorphous of a term,” he said. “They feel they can’t do anything about mental health awareness, but if we call it suicide prevention, then they ask what can they do to help.”

With the aid of the Denver foundation in conjunction with the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, Beyer has been leading a grassroots campaign among “enlightened” contractors to create awareness, advocacy and action for mental health and suicide prevention.

He has started a LinkedIn group along with colleagues in the Construction Financial Management Association, and they are now starting to schedule construction industry outreach presentations for 2016 via seminars, workshops and webinars.

For example, the Associated General Contractors of Washington will sponsor a presentation in February, and the AGC of Oregon has scheduled a presentation for June.

Understanding Red Flags

A number of construction executives explained how they are incorporating suicide prevention measures within their health and safety programs.

“First, acknowledge and embrace the fact that your work culture has the power to make a difference in the lives of your employees,” said Heather Gallien, RK’s director of marketing and communications.

“Accept that it’s an honor to take on the responsibility of looking out for the mental health and well-being of your workers. Decide to be a leader in affecting change in an industry that’s at high risk for suicide.”

Second, contractors should adopt guidelines, such as those from the foundation, and then take time with management to gain an understanding of work culture “red flags” and create an action plan to mitigate them, Gallien said.

“Furthermore, ask your management teams to start talking about mental health issues openly and transparently,” she said. “Ask them to make it okay for employees to do the same.”

There are tactical conversations and tools a company can adopt, but the most important factor is that those at the top talk about their own issues — when appropriate, added RK’s chief operations officer Jon Kinning. Managers should also model for their employees, especially men, that work is a safe environment to bring up personal concerns and to ask for help.

David James, chief financial officer at FNF Construction Inc. in Tempe, Az., said that, while the firm has an employee assistance program, the key is to make employees aware of services available and eliminate the stigma so often associated with mental health issues.

The EAP is a good starting point, but additional direction from management is critical to provide employee education and hands on support to at-risk employees.

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“One such group ‘at risk’ are those employees suffering through recovery from workers’ compensation injuries,” James said.

“FNF has had a long-standing philosophy to manage workers’ compensation cases with hands-on management, including regular communication, activities to support recovery and return-to-work programs. The caring attitude for such cases, and efforts to keep employees within the FNF family helps reduce the vulnerability of our workforce.”

Patrick Monea, vice president and chief financial officer at Granger Construction Co. in Lansing, Mich. said that suicide prevention is not an issue that his firm is currently focused on, but given the industry statistics, management now feels it is an issue “we have to strongly address.”

“Given the inherent stress of our industry and the associated culture, we feel the need to move toward education and prevention,” Monea said.

Granger’s human resources manager Matt Bozung added: “We must talk about mental health and suicide prevention openly and not ignore them as real issues. Further, recognition that specified training beyond basics, like stress management, is needed.”

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