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Suicide Prevention Finds a Home at RK

BY CLARE MILLER



RK, a Denver-based mechanical contracting, manufacturing and service company, understands that mental health is everyone's business. RK's work to promote mental health awareness was recently featured in [Constructor Magazine](#), an important trade publication from the Associated General Contractors (AGC) of America, the largest construction industry association.



The construction industry is among the top nine occupations with the highest risk for suicide (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The industry's workforce demographics, including gender, age and educational level, combined with a "tough-guy culture" and a tendency to view mental health problems as personal weaknesses, all contribute to high rates of untreated mental illnesses and suicide.

RK, the Carson J Spencer Foundation, and the National Alliance for Suicide Prevention developed a resource for the industry called the [Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace](#). RK Marketing and Communications Director, Heather Gallien, contends that the Construction Industry Blueprint is a call-to-action for industry leaders to take a stand for their employees' wellbeing, "Skilled trade workers are primarily males, and in this industry especially, they're not accustomed to talking about their internal

state. Industry leaders can support their mental and emotional wellbeing by letting them know that it's OK to discuss their personal concerns with their co-workers or supervisor. A culture that supports emotional openness has much higher odds of being able to help its employees."

Gallien continues, "At RK, safety is a top priority over all else. With one of the industry's best safety ratings and prestigious OSHA VPP accreditations, our commitment shows. Safety and wellbeing are tied together, and we actually leverage our employee safety messaging by using it as an opportunity to "tack on" additional messages about the importance of seeking help for mental health issues. Our field workers are used to hearing safety messages, so safety announcements create an opportunity to promote mental health as well. They are both part of RK's total commitment to employee wellbeing."

RK is headquartered in Denver, Colorado, and has more than 1,100 employees. RK Mechanical, the company's largest business unit, is hired by general contractors to fabricate and install HVAC, plumbing and piping systems in major construction projects. RK has seven distinct business units and is the region's largest single source for mechanical contracting, custom manufacturing, steel fabrication, prefabricated construction, facilities services, electrical work and water treatment solutions. RK's projects can be found throughout the state of Colorado, across the country, and around the globe. Examples include Microsoft, the US embassy in Berlin, Ritz-Carlton, Coors Field, Denver International Airport, and Verizon.

RK chief operating officer Jon Kinning shared in *Constructor* that the loss of an employee to suicide spurred their interest in stepping up and taking action, "One day, he began giving all his tools away to his coworkers. We were not prepared to recognize the signs...That was a wake-up call that there must be more that employers can do to recognize signs of mental distress and offer support."

RK began raising awareness about mental health and suicide prevention during National Suicide Prevention Week in September 2014. Exposure to the work of the Carson J Spencer Foundation suicide prevention organization helped the company understand the scope of the problem – and the tools to do something about it. Their innovative approach to addressing mental health and suicide prevention leverages existing programs and customizes them to reflect the company's culture and the construction industry.

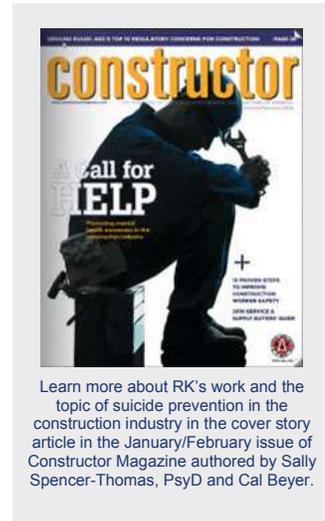
Highlights include:

- Toolbox talks with construction workers at jobsites;
- Suicide prevention training for managers;
- Mental health resources through the RK Wellness Program, including an in-house wellness coach and 1:1 counseling;
- Promotion of ManTherapy.org, a website developed specifically for men struggling with personal issues. RK provided stickers for hard hats and posters with the slogan, "You can't fix your mental health with duct tape" at offices and jobsites.

RK is not only working to make a difference with its own employees, it's giving back to others. RK provides funding to the Carson J Spencer Foundation, contributed to the development of the construction industry blueprint, and participates in conferences to share their experience with other employer leaders (view a [presentation by Kinning at the US/Canada Forum on Workplace Suicide Prevention](#) held in Denver in 2014).



Cal Beyer, director of risk management at Lakeside Industries, serves as a construction industry representative to the Workplace Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. He explained the significance of RK's leadership on this topic is, saying, "RK has been a clear pace setter on this topic in the construction industry. The work that RK has done is encouraging other construction firms across the country to consider how they can address mental health challenges in their companies. RK provides an example for other construction firms that mental health is a real threat to the safety and wellbeing of their workforce and their families. I admire the ground-breaking work RK has done -- their leadership is inspiring."



Taking on a topic like suicide is tough in any occupational setting. Sally Spencer-Thomas, CEO and co-founder of the Carson J Spencer Foundation and co-lead of the Workplace Task Force for the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention explains, "Bold, visionary leadership is what is needed to shift culture and make suicide prevention a health and safety priority. No good can come from holding back, but great reward is possible by leading with compassion and an evidence-based strategy."

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