

LHSFNA Joins Push for Total Worker Health

Since its inception, the Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America (LHSFNA) has worked with LIUNA members and signatory contractors to improve the health and safety of Laborers on and off the job. Several years ago, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) coined their own term for this concept, calling it [Total Worker Health™](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/) (<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/>).

NIOSH recently held the [1st International Symposium to Advance Total Worker Health](http://www.eagleson.org/conferences/total-worker-health) (<http://www.eagleson.org/conferences/total-worker-health>), and invited the LHSFNA to speak on the subject. The LHSFNA was also selected to be one of 14 Presenting Partners, an acknowledgement of its commitment to health and safety. The LHSFNA's Scott Schneider, Director of the Occupational Safety and Health Division, and Jamie Becker, Associate Director of the Health Promotion Division, attended the two-day event.

“Total Worker Health faces several challenges in construction, the biggest of which is that construction jobs are short term,” says Schneider. “Workers often have several different employers throughout the year, and some contractors may not see the benefit of preventing long-term exposures for short-term employees. Others might have great programs, but workers aren't there long enough to get the full benefit from them.” The transient nature of the work, combined with the fact that most construction contractors are small companies that may not have robust safety and health programs, presents some extra challenges for Total Worker Health in construction.

Construction companies tend to focus on minimizing on-the-job hazards that cause immediate physical injuries and fatalities such as falls, electrocutions, amputations and work zone intrusions. For years, LIUNA's signatory contractors have understood the benefits of reducing exposure to these kinds of hazards. In addition to providing a safe workplace, contractors benefit through excellent safety records and less frequent workers' compensation claims, both of which help them stay competitive in a tough industry.

However, it can be more difficult to get contractors to institute programs to prevent occupational exposures that can lead to chronic health conditions later in life. Conditions such as work-related asthma, COPD and asbestosis are invisible and take years to present themselves. This leads some contractors to miss the mark, as they become more focused on safety hazards than health hazards – even though many more workers are affected by health hazards.

“Along with providing a safe workplace, the goal is to promote lasting employee health and wellness,” says Becker. “The average age of a construction worker is now 42 years old, so keeping an aging workforce healthy is an issue that's becoming more important for employers.”

Health hazards such as smoking, obesity, high blood pressure and skin cancer all have a lasting impact on the health of workers, both during working years and into retirement. But when

contractors start asking workers to eliminate bad behaviors off the job site, there may be resistance.

“Employers have to first take care of their legal responsibility under the OSH Act to provide a safe workplace,” says Schneider. “Otherwise, Total Worker Health can be viewed as another case of ‘blame the worker.’” Essentially, before companies encourage their employees to quit smoking, lose weight or use sunscreen *off* the job, they should make sure they’ve made safety and health a priority *on* the job. Once workers see a safe workplace, they tend to be more open to employers asking them to take care of their own health.

Because unions and their contractors provide health care and pension benefits through joint labor-management funds, LIUNA’s contractors have a shared incentive to reduce chronic health conditions.

When it comes to promoting safety and health in construction, one idea that’s gaining traction is focusing on limiting exposures that happen both on and off the job. These are known as concurrent or “dual” exposures, and include common hazards such as noise, sun exposure and ladders.

“The key is making safe and healthy choices, whether you’re on the job site or relaxing at home,” says Becker. “It means putting on sunscreen to mow the lawn just like you would before working outside all day, and it means practicing ladder safety at home even though no one is watching.” After all, if workers sustain an injury at home, it can affect their livelihood just like an injury suffered on the job.

Successful [Total Worker Health](#)

(<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/pdfs/KeynoteDrHoward1stInternatSymposiumTWH.pdf>)

initiatives extend beyond targeting dual exposures, however. They also raise awareness about important health issues, and often focus on encouraging workers to make healthier food choices, lower high blood pressure or become more physically active.

Although off-the-job exposures and behaviors may not appear to have an immediate impact on workers’ health, some have [synergistic or additive effects](#) (<http://www.lhsfna.org/index.cfm/lifelines/november-2011/make-construction-work-safer-quit-smoking/>) with on-the-job hazards. For example, workers who smoke and are also exposed to certain hazardous chemicals have a dramatically higher risk for developing lung-related illnesses like asthma, COPD and lung cancer. Promoting Total Worker Health may help extend the careers of experienced, skilled workers who would otherwise be unable to continue a career in construction.

With its focus on both occupational safety and health promotion, the LHSFNA is uniquely positioned to help LIUNA members and contractors promote the concept of Total Worker Health. To find out how the LHSFNA can help you develop a successful program to promote health and safety both on and off the job, call 202-628-5465.

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