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A Call for HELP

Promoting mental
health awareness in the
construction industry



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A Call for HELP

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

"Be vocal, be visible, be visionary. There is no shame in stepping forward, but there is great risk in holding back and just hoping for the best."

BY DR. SALLY SPENCER-THOMAS AND CAL BEYER

THIS QUOTE CAME FROM a group of college presidents in the 1990s who were attempting to proactively address substance abuse issues when no other campuses were. Other leaders worried about how their constituents might view them if they were the first ones to voice their concerns. It took bold leadership to stand up and say, "Not another life to lose."

Today, the construction industry is seeing the same momentum, but the issue is suicide prevention. Increasingly, leaders are stepping forward and changing culture with a new vision and a set of best practices.

WHY SHOULD CONSTRUCTION LEADERS CARE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the construction industry often lands among the top 10 industries at risk for suicide. Multiple demographic factors contribute to this including gender, age, and the educational level of the construction workforce. A recent medical study highlights the rising mortality rates of middle-aged males (aged 45-54) without a college education which constitutes a large portion of construction's aging workforce in both the skilled and unskilled trades. Moreover, industry risk factors include the male-dominated workforce with a tough-guy culture which reinforces reluctance among employees to reach out when their mental health is compromised. Thus, many treatable mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and substance abuse are going undiagnosed until they progress to catastrophic outcomes. Add to this the family and social isolation, sleep disruption and chronic pain often associated with field construction work, and many workers find themselves self-medicating with alcohol or becoming addicted to pain medication.

Untreated or mistreated mental health issues can be very costly to the workplace through direct medical costs as well as reduced productivity through presenteeism (working while sick) and absenteeism. Because most people consider mental health

problems personal issues, most employers have not invested in finding ways to build policy, protocol and programs to elevate mental health promotion and suicide prevention as health and safety priorities. There has not been widespread adoption of mental health in company wellness programs or much beyond basic Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to help promote mental health awareness in the construction workplace.

Fortunately, this is all starting to change. With the release of the new national *Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace*, leaders are starting to pay attention. This is a free publication developed by the Carson J Spencer Foundation (CJSF), the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and RK Mechanical, a Denver-based construction company and AGC of Colorado Building Chapter member. The guide offers employers a checklist to assess risks and readiness for change. Furthermore, it provides suggestions for easy 'first steps' like Toolbox Talks as well as a more comprehensive and sustained approach.

A Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace is available as a free downloadable PDF at <http://www.carsonjspencer.org/programs/working-minds/construction-industry-blueprint/>.

A CALL TO ACTION

The process starts with bold leadership — leaders who are willing to admit "this matters to the well-being of our company and the families of our employees." Strong, strategic leaders integrate suicide prevention and mental health promotion into their existing safety culture, so that it is not just a one-off training or awareness campaign, but something that routinely gets addressed in many different settings.

Contractors are learning that there is an overlap between how they address mental and physical health crises. With CPR, most know how to identify the signs of someone in acute distress, ▶

Training processes like Working Minds (www.WorkingMinds.org) offer employees basic training – in as short as two hours – on how to identify someone in a suicide crisis, have important conversations that can sustain life, and how and where to refer someone who needs professional care.

respond with a proven approach to sustain life and alert the medical professionals to come and treat the afflicted. The same is true with mental health crises. Training processes like Working Minds (www.WorkingMinds.org) offer employees basic training – in as short as two hours – on how to identify someone in a suicide crisis, have important conversations that can sustain life, and how and where to refer someone who needs professional care.

AGC OF WASHINGTON ADDRESSES SUICIDE PREVENTION

Mandi Kime, AGC of Washington's director of safety, has been an early adopter of the need to address suicide prevention. She shared that a child of a professional colleague died by suicide and that created urgency. "Society does not discuss this topic enough," says Kime. "As an industry that prides itself on toughness and a get-it-done approach to problems, construction is prime for challenges of suicide." Kime also states that the industry needs to remind people that there is nothing weak about accepting help and that aid is available and in many formats.

"It strikes me that we should all be talking about this," she says, "in every community, whether it is your workplace, your associations, your family, your support groups, your interest groups, your church. The communities I am a part of are immensely valuable to me; I don't want to lose any of those great people to suicide. I can make a difference by talking about it, offering support, and connecting people with resources. We all can do that." While EAPs are important and they play a very valuable role, they are not the 'be all end all' to suicide prevention, mainly because most EAPs require the person to reach out to them. Suicide prevention requires proactive education, outreach and engagement.

According to Kime, the most significant obstacle is conquering the "I'm tough enough" attitude and showing the workforce that it is acceptable to show emotion and open up about any struggles. "This concept of showing you care is not new when you're a safety professional," she says, "but it's important to take it a step further and make human-to-human connections. We may not be able to fix people's problems, but we *all* can connect people with resources."

A CASE STUDY

Jon Kinning, chief operations officer, RK (formerly RK Mechanical), shares that his company began promoting mental health awareness and suicide prevention in 2014. "We had long recognized that the construction industry is a high risk for mental health and suicide," he says. "Men in skilled trade jobs, or jobs with high risk – like at construction sites – are nearly three times more likely to die by suicide than the average population. So we had some awareness of the issue, but lacked concrete ways of dealing with it."

Kinning recounts the story of an RK employee, "who, one day at the end of a shift gave away all his tools to fellow employees. Most were appreciative and completely unaware of the warning signs for suicide. The employees became concerned and followed the individual home, but it was too late. He had already taken his life. They missed that giving away his tools could be a warning sign that he was saying goodbye to his co-workers. But we were

not prepared to recognize the signs then. That was a wake-up call that there must be more that employers can do to recognize signs of mental distress and offer support."

Heather Gallien, RK's director of marketing and communication, says that RK became "aware of the work of the Carson J Spencer Foundation through our participation in Leadership Denver through the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. We realized not only the magnitude of the problem, but also that there are resources available and ways to shift our work culture to support individuals' issues." RK began "promoting suicide prevention to its workforce during National Suicide Prevention Week in September 2014 and kicked off its efforts by doing a comprehensive survey in conjunction with CJSF," says Gallien.

Additional details of RK's proactive suicide prevention efforts, include:

- Toolbox talks with construction workers at jobsites;
- Suicide prevention training with selected managers;
- Actual conversations with employees (Jon Kinning presents at every outing where he speaks to employees);
- Mental health and suicide prevention articles and resources in employee newsletters;
- Distribution of posters, stickers and coffee coasters with suicide prevention help line phone numbers;
- Mental health support resources available in the existing RK Wellness Program. An in-house RK wellness coach provides one-on-one coaching and counseling;
- Funding and support of the Carson J Spencer Foundation;
- Review and distribution of CJSF's Construction Industry Blueprint.

As part of CJSF's support resources, RK introduced Mantherapy.org, a website for men struggling with personal issues. RK utilized the Man Therapy campaign with the slogan "You can't fix your mental health with duct tape." Mental health "duct tape" themed stickers for workers' hard hats and Man Therapy "duct tape" posters were displayed around the office and at jobsites. "Employees actually interacted with these posters and put additional duct tape on them," says Gallien. "We saw this as a very positive thing as they were reading and engaging with the message."

With the construction industry's increased focus on safety and health of employees, it is time to broaden the spectrum from physical safety to include mental health. The *Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace* is a resource that educates, equips and empowers construction leaders to take action on this vital topic. The time is now for the construction industry to tackle suicide prevention. ♦

Sally Spencer-Thomas is the CEO and co-founder of the Carson J Spencer Foundation, an award-winning organization leading innovation in suicide prevention. She also established and founded Working Minds, the nation's first comprehensive suicide prevention program exclusively dedicated to suicide prevention in the workplace. She may be contacted at 303-219-5042 or Sally@CarsonJSpencer.org. Cal Beyer is the director of risk management at Lakeside Industries in Issaquah, Washington, an AGC of Washington member. Cal has more than 27 years of professional experience in safety, insurance, and risk management and has served the construction industry in various capacities. He may be contacted at 425-313-2611 or Cal.Beyer@lakesideindustries.com.

