

Mental Health Crisis highlighted during contractor conversations about safety

During an epidemic of suicides and long running stigma around mental health, general contractors in Wisconsin are opening conversations about the psychological state and well-being of both laborers and office workers. Mental health is rapidly becoming an industry priority after the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health experts said having a plan is as essential as using personal protective equipment on the job.

Mental health was a serious issue for construction long before the pandemic and the industry had five times the national average of suicides. The suicide rate in construction was [53.2 per 100,000 workers](#) in 2020, the Associated General Contractors of America reported. Before that, the rate was 45.3 per 100,000 workers in 2017, a [study](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed.

Not only do mental health crises and suicides negatively affect teams, but it can also be a strain on company resources when they go unaddressed, according to the National Safety Council and NORC at the University of Chicago. A construction firm with 200 workers in Wisconsin would lose more than \$250,000 while covering health care costs, lost time and job turnover expenses. If company's let the [lack of mental health services](#) go unchecked, the costs will continue to rise.

"15 people a day are lost to suicide in construction," Hunzinger Construction Vice President of Risk Management Kevin Sandkuhler said. He's also one of the founders of the [Wisconsin Construction Wellness Community](#), a group that promotes mental health resources. "Most people don't know how prevalent it is and what to do, how to recognize it and what to do if you do recognize it," he said.

Sandkuhler joined Bruce Morton of Marsh & McLennan Agency, Jared Owen of Grunau Company and Elizabeth Polheber of VJS Construction to form the WCWC. When the organization started three years ago, the bar was set low as not a lot of people talked about mental health or available resources.

Large general contractors are integrating mental health into their orientations now, including subcontractors who join the job site, Polheber said. Alongside physical crisis management plans for situations such as a fire or collapse, companies are including a mental health crisis management plan in their regiment now.

Posters on jobsites have QR codes anyone can scan to get an Employee Assistance Program, which can make connections with mental healthcare professionals, Polheber said. During onboarding preconstruction meetings, crews discuss boundaries and schedules at general contractors. Senior management roles and field superintendents are also receiving Question Persuade and Refer (QPR) training, where they can approach someone potentially experiencing a crisis in a professional manner and possibly get them help.

Stressors affect everyone in the industry, but conversation spreads

In construction, there is a swath of environmental, cultural and work situations that induce stress on any employee in the chain, whether they work as a laborer or in the office. "The amount of pressure and stress people are under is significant," Hunzinger Construction Director of

Corporate Affairs Joan Zepecki said. “Jobs need to get done quicker, safer and cheaper, and there’s a constant pressure on productivity and working faster.”

Another area of focus is absenteeism and presenteeism, where during the latter people may show up to work unfocused or distracted, which may cause risks to safety on the field, Zepecki said. “It’s important to have their coworkers recognize that and get people the help they need, because it’s a potential danger to everyone on the site,” she added.

Workers who are dealing with problems at home, such as scheduling childcare for example, will find stress in a job demanding them to be there for consecutive days and long hours. “If you’re not showing up once a week, you’re going to lose your job,” Sandkuhler said. “We’ve been that way ever since I can remember and it’s time to dig into that a little bit more and ask, ‘Why can’t you show up?’”

For the longest time, “suck it up” was the unofficial mantra among men regarding problems at home or on the job, but as WCWC worked they say the tide shift to more talk about mental health issues. In the bigger picture, the mental health conversation reaches potentially thousands of workers as they travel between different projects. On a smaller scale, personal interactions with coworkers who needed a hand had their own benefits.

“It’s taken off,” Morton said about the group’s snowball effect. “We did a seminar three years ago and probably had 20 people attend. But the effect and the amount of people who want to talk is amazing, I’ve taught classes with almost 300 construction workers.”

“It’s been effective and lifechanging for the people who are opening and addressing issues, it’s like night and day from where it was five to 10 years ago from where it is now,” Zepecki said.

The construction industry has one of the highest suicide rates compared to other industries and creating and maintaining healthy work organizations is an important strategy for preventing worker suicides, a CDC blog said. Some organizations such as CPWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training are leading by example by sharing [information about suicide prevention](#).