



Kansas LTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Road & Bridge Agencies

Butler County's Worker Safety Culture Has One Goal: Get Them Home Safely

By Lisa Harris

A cultural shift toward greater worker safety is saving the county hundreds of thousands of dollars due to fewer injuries and claims.



Public works departments always have worker safety as their top priority. But how does that translate in terms of numbers of injuries and insurance premiums and claims? Butler County, Kansas, had a few incidents that convinced them that they could do better in making safety a priority, and with the help of their insurance company and support from county Administration, they got every department in the county on board. This article will describe Butler County's safety program and what motivated it, and describe some of the benefits they are seeing now that it has been in place a few years.

What motivated the new program?

Sometimes it takes a serious incident to motivate real change. That is what happened in Butler County. One harrowing incident with a public

works employee cemented the County's interest in getting serious about safety. Another one drove the point home even more. "After these incidents, we could not go back to 'business as usual,'" said Darryl Lutz, director of public works. The County needed to make

significant changes to see different results.

The first incident was an electrocution. A truck bed in the process of dumping a load hit an overhead power line.

An operator on an attached piece of equipment was thrown over 10 ft, and suffered permanent nerve and muscle damage in one hand. Lutz said it was a miracle the employee survived at all, and was able to return to work. It shook up Lutz and the County's administration a great deal. "That was the turning point," Lutz said.

The second incident, around the same time, involved a summer employee driving a county pilot truck. A motorist following the pilot truck was confused by what the truck's driver was doing, and he followed the pilot truck into the active work zone and collided with it. Luckily, no one was seriously injured in that incident.

Post-incident interviews revealed room for improvement

For the electrocution incident, the County's insurance company, ICI, Inc., carefully reviewed the incident. They put together a team to look at what happened, why it happened, and other things that could have contributed.

The in-depth review called attention to some things the county could be doing better in worker safety, and resulted in a county-wide shift towards seeing safety as everyone's responsibility, not just the individual's. Administration invested in an on-call consultant and several tools and new procedures to make the shift a reality. We'll highlight some of these later in this article.

Follow-up after the pilot truck incident revealed that the county needed to do a better job of creating a culture where employees could report safety problems and not feel like tattlers, Lutz said. The insurance company conducted interviews of employees who were at the scene. Employees were reluctant to say what really happened. "The 5th employee interviewed finally spoke up about what went wrong," Lutz said.

The follow-up to that incident resulted in a change in how pilot truck drivers are trained.

The post-incident interview process also revealed that the county needed to change its approach to incident reporting. "We were not asking the



right questions, Lutz said, “and we needed to be more thorough in our documentation.”

Going beyond business as usual

Lutz said that safety has always been a consideration in his department, but they treated it “passively.” He described their former approach, unfortunately all-too common:

“We routinely talked to our employees about the importance of working safely, watching out, being smart... and then sent them out to do their work. Then someone would get injured. In response, we’d do the same thing again. We would repeat our safety message, our employees would get on with their business, and we would keep seeing injuries.”

Lutz said they did not spend as much time as they needed in asking: What could have been done differently to prevent that injury? ...maybe things that they had not thought of before. As it turns out, they could do *several* things differently, and now they’re doing them. And they are seeing the results.

The right tools, the right backing

What was needed to get to significant and lasting change? “The right tools and the attention and support of Administration,” said Lutz. A cultural shift was needed from the top down, he said, along with a commitment of priorities, staff time and dollars.

The resources and tools adopted by the County include the following:

An on-call consultant. ICI is the Kansas affiliate of Three Sixty Safety™, a safety consulting program originally developed for the private sector. The program’s approach is to provide hands-on, ongoing consultation for their customers to help build safety into their operations and to provide accountability for results. Lonnie Currier from ICI helps the County develop and implement their safety policies, procedures, and training programs.

Training programs. Three Sixty Safety™ has over 160 worker safety courses, accessible online. Currier

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created a customized safety training program for Butler County using the program’s courses that best fit the county’s needs.

The online training courses usually last 20-30 minutes. They are in PPT format, so they can be paused at any time. Some of the training is interactive, with quizzes to help employees retain what they learn.

New training policy. Every department in the County is charged with developing its own safety training program based on the needs of its employees and their jobs. Some departments provide training quarterly, some more often.

Regular training sessions. Public Works holds about 12-15 training sessions per year, Lutz said. Training can be taken individually or in a group setting. Lutz said most public works employees participate in group training sessions for the entire department.

Every employee must take a test on the material and pass it. If an employee does not pass, he or she will have an opportunity to re-take the test. If an employee refuses to take the training or the test, that is reflected in their annual performance evaluation, Lutz said.

Training sessions are also an opportunity to review incidents with employees and share any lessons learned

from other departments that may be relevant to their job(s). Employees also learn about safety policy changes that are being considered.

Multi-department safety committee.

Currier chairs a new County safety committee that meets for one hour at a set day and time each month. Members are department heads and hourly employees from departments with high exposure rates, including public works (landfill, office administration, shop, noxious weeds), the Sheriff’s office, emergency management, EMS, and facilities management. The county administrator and finance director also participate. This committee reviews every incident and near-miss report in the County and actions taken, reviews employee suggestions for improving safety, and reviews and updates safety policies and procedures as needed.

Accident investigation teams. Teams have been formed for each shift, and have been trained in how to respond to an incident should one occur.

New accident investigation procedures and forms. Lutz describes these as “aggressive,” designed to get to the root of the problem. Most of the injuries at the County were found to be the result of human error.

PPE policy. Public Works has adopted a very strict PPE policy, and it is evolving, Lutz said. They have a basic, minimum requirement for PPE but they are now identifying which personal equipment is needed for each task.

The County pays for PPE. “If it is for safety, we pay for it,” Lutz said. Employees receive an annual subsidy for the right type of boots and for jeans. The County provides shirts, vests, gloves, and eye and ear protection. They refresh PPE when needed.

In addition to providing PPE, Public Works has a policy that when you start your day and starting planning what tools and equipment you will need, you FIRST consider the safety equipment you will need, Lutz said.

Steve Wilson, shop foreman, said



that, in the past, crews would sometimes improvise their own PPE; now the County makes sure the appropriate equipment is available, well-maintained, and crews are using it.

Clear accountability. Perhaps the most important aspect of the County's new safety culture is impressing on every employee that they are responsible for their own safety as well as that of their coworkers. Employees, coworkers, crew leaders and supervisors all have equal accountability—and consequences—for action and inaction.

As Lutz explains it, "Our goal is to make sure every employee makes it home safely at the end of the day. We tell our employees: Put yourself in the role of explaining a tragedy to a fellow employee's family. Ask yourself if you did everything possible to prevent that tragedy. What are the natural consequences of silence or inaction? Could you live with that?"

The County has made it clear that safety has to be primary in every task, every decision, and every action. Employees are expected to report safety problems. "We found that some employees knew about a safety problem and kept quiet about it. We treat those employees now as if they caused an incident," Lutz said.

New "Thanks a Million" Program.

Employees who report a near-miss or have a safety suggestion are eligible to receive a scratch-off lottery ticket from Administration. They also have their names printed in the County safety newsletter.

The results

During the first year following implementation of the training program, July 2012 to June 2013, Lutz said Butler County had a "banner year" of almost no claims across all departments.

"We've had some ups and downs since then, but overall it has been phenomenal. In 2015 we paid \$100,000 less in premiums than in 2012," Lutz said. "The County's premium modification factor dropped 40 points

Tips for Creating a Worker Safety Culture From Butler County

- Never pass off an incident that occurs, no matter how minor. Treat every incident as a learning opportunity. You may not have a 100 percent preventable work environment, but you can learn from it. The aim is not to find fault, but to learn from it.
- Look beyond the person to their supervisor and to management. A lesson learned here might be relevant to other departments.
- Throw out old attitudes about safety training (it's boring, I already know this stuff, waste of time...). Communicate clearly that employees are responsible for their own safety and the safety of their co-workers.
- Having and using PPE appropriate to the job is critical.
- An incident affects not just the person, but the person's co-workers, management, and the department's productivity.
- If you are in an area with rough ground, be careful when you jump down out of a vehicle. Wear work boots that protect your ankles from sprains. Wear shirts with sleeves.
- Make your safety message hit as close to the heart as possible. Don't sugarcoat what's at stake.
- It's human nature to not want to tattle. But it's important to create a workplace culture where taking safety issues seriously, and reporting them – no matter how minor – is seen as positive by everyone.

during that time period. Our bean-counters are *thrilled*. What we save in premiums alone more than offsets what we pay for Three Sixty Safety™ and our consultant. But more important, fewer of our employees are getting injured."

The County still adopting new safety policies and procedures and "adapting employees," Lutz said. Wilson said some employees are skeptical that the safety emphasis is really just a way for the County to cut costs. But lack of safety has many more costs than financial. Wilson said they emphasize to employees: "it's not about the County saving money in claims, it's about YOU."

In sum

When workers are injured it affects agency productivity, morale, and the bottom line. Public works departments commonly see leg, ankle, and back injuries, trauma to hands and body, and joint injuries. Butler County has had its share of those, plus a few close calls for potentially deadly incidents. Those incidents paved the way for a major shift in looking at safety

in the County—one that involves everyone—in every department—from Administration on down.

Lutz said: "No doubt about it—it requires a lot of staff time to do something like this—to create a safety culture. But it's worth it."

Wilson, who has worked for the County a long time, and much of that operating equipment, has seen first-hand the benefits to the public works crews of the stronger emphasis on safety.

"Safety now is everybody's responsibility—not just a 'safety guy' preaching at them," Wilson said. "There is heightened safety awareness, and more guys are looking out for each other. That, more than anything else, is helping us reach our goal of getting our people home safely, every day, to enjoy their lives." ■

Reprinted from the Summer 2015 issue of the *Kansas LTAP Newsletter*, a publication of the Kansas Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) at the Kansas University Transportation Center.