

## *Safety first*

# Jobsite incidents decline as businesses take initiative

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Some South Carolina construction firms always understood the importance of maintaining safe worksites. Others took some time to come to the realization.

And then there are those who don't appreciate safety's merits until they are slapped with an OSHA violation or suffer losses through their negligence.

Whatever the cause, construction industry participants agree that more and more businesses are backing their commitment to safety with time, energy and money. The declining number of workplace deaths in recent years suggests that their efforts are making a difference.

Construction deaths dropped nearly 40 percent, to 20 deaths in 2006, compared with 33 in 2005.

"We all hate to see loss of life and limb, so measures have been taken to prevent and minimize those," said Deepal Eliatamby, president of Alliance Consulting Engineers, a Columbia-based firm that does work statewide.

He says construction industry safety measures have expanded in the last three to five years due to regulatory action, voluntary action and unfortunate incidents. He also says general awareness has been raised by the Department of Transportation's highway construction safety campaign, which includes billboards and television ads.

Shane Bolding, a principal with Greenville-based THS Constructors Inc., says companies are increasingly taking the initiative to promote safety audits and training as opposed to years past, when regulators were the driving force.

"Everybody wants to be safe because

the costs for not being safe are so high," he said. "The liabilities are huge if you're not safe; you want that to be the No. 1 priority on every job."

S.C. OSHA citations can cost companies up to \$70,000 per violation. Plus, loss of worker productivity, potential lawsuits, insurance premiums and other economic penalties come with placing employee health in jeopardy.

Frank Elmore, president of Elmore & Wall PA, a Greenville-based construction law firm, says that trade organizations, risk managers for workers' compensation carriers and owners have deepened their commitment to improving safety over the last 10 years.

"Owners have insisted on enhanced safety performance by contractors and subcontractors," he says. "They've done it through contract requirements, contract negotiations and an overall emphasis on workplace safety."

Elmore says some owners have a threshold they won't allow a contractor's risk or experience modification factor to exceed. The higher the factor, the poorer the safety record.

He also credits local administration of OSHA requirements with helping to reduce job site injuries and fatalities, compared with states where OSHA compliance was administered by the federal government.

David De Vita, president of Carolina Safety Consultants LLC, says insurance costs can be controlled if you are doing the right things from a safety standpoint. He worked in the insurance industry for 15 years prior to establishing his Greenville-based workplace/job-site safety consulting company.

Owners and senior managers bear the ultimate responsibility for creating a culture of safety, he says. They must make it clear that safety is a main concern from the earliest contact with prospective employees

and keep emphasizing the point in training sessions and on worksites.

"In the past, a lot of companies went wrong by presenting safety as a negative thing: 'do it or else,'" he says. "The companies that get it and understand it are making it more of a positive atmosphere. From the time you walk in the door, they say 'this is what we're about and how we're going to operate.'"


In many cases, companies ought to be sharing those safety messages in Spanish as well.

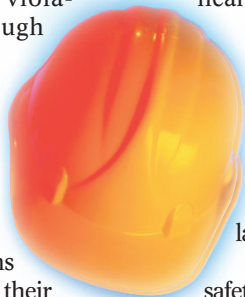
"The intention of OSHA is to make sure every employee is trained and educated with regard to safe work practices," De Vita says. "A lot of owners and companies have really not taken their program and translated it into Spanish, nor do they provide translators during safety meetings."

This may be a problem, given the increasing number of Spanish-speaking construction workers. Hispanic workers, many foreign-born, were hired for two out of every three new construction jobs last year, according to the Pew Hispanic Center's Latino Labor Report 2006.

The S.C. Department of Labor says Hispanic workers accounted for roughly a quarter of South Carolina's workplace deaths in 2004. Nationally, 13.8 percent of workplace deaths were among Hispanic workers, even though they made up only 10.7 percent of the work force.

Carolina Safety Consultants works with an interpreter to conduct safety meetings and OSHA training sessions in Spanish and English.

"It's made a huge impact," De Vita says. "The morale of the workers has increased dramatically - they ask questions, get more involved and provide more input in the meetings." 



### > For Information

#### S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation

[www.llr.state.sc.us/AboutUs/Mediacenter/index.asp?file=news/FatalitiesLower06](http://www.llr.state.sc.us/AboutUs/Mediacenter/index.asp?file=news/FatalitiesLower06)

#### Pew Hispanic Center

[www.pewhispanic.org/factsheets/factsheet.php?FactsheetID=28](http://www.pewhispanic.org/factsheets/factsheet.php?FactsheetID=28)

#### S.C. Occupational Safety and Health Administration

[www.llr.state.sc.us/Labor/Osha/index.asp?file=uash.htm](http://www.llr.state.sc.us/Labor/Osha/index.asp?file=uash.htm)