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VPP Participant Profile

Torcon Inc.



When it comes to participation in OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program, Torcon Inc. can be excused if it seems to operate under a constant sense of urgency. It does.

Since 1993, Torcon has qualified 15 of its construction sites and its Red Bank, NJ, headquarters as VPP Star sites – the highest level of VPP participation. Employers in VPP achieve average injury rates 50 percent lower than other employers in their respective industries.

Construction firms that participate in VPP have an added burden: The nature of construction work results in injury, illness and fatality rates that are higher than in most other industries. In 2006, the construction industry accounted for 1,226 of 5,703 fatal U.S. work injuries – the most of any industry sector, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Leon Baukh is Torcon's corporate safety director and has guided the firm's VPP efforts. He said that when it comes to qualifying for the program, the primary difference between construction and general industry is that general industry firms must compile three years of detailed safety records before being eligible to apply. Construction firms must submit only one year's worth.

Although that may seem to give construction firms an advantage, construction is a transient industry and any advantage goes away because the Star designation ends when a project is completed. "When the job is over, the Star is gone. In general industry, you continue to build on your Star and just go through your recertification," Baukh said.

But Baukh is undaunted. As new projects come into the company, he looks to continue the VPP culture and qualify new projects. "It's very challenging because you don't have a constant workforce. Your workforce is changing on a daily basis. Many people on the jobsite will stay for a year, but 40 percent of them are just coming and going depending on the operations," he said.

Baukh said workers often will work at a site for one contractor for a few months, and come back and work for another before the job ends. Falls, struck-by incidents, electrocutions, and improper use of ladders and scaffolding remain the biggest hazards facing workers, Baukh said.

"The challenge is you don't have two or three years to prepare [workers] for change. You have to get them right away, indoctrinate them and explain to them what is expected. You have a short time to explain what VPP is about," he said.

Torcon, which also maintains fully staffed offices in Philadelphia and Puerto Rico in addition to its headquarters, currently has six active VPP Star sites. The company has had the first VPP Star site awarded in Puerto Rico – known as VPP Guanin – and the first VPP Star construction site to ever be recertified.

Employing a large Hispanic workforce, Torcon has received high marks for its bilingual communication and safety training program. The company estimates that the program has contributed to an estimated 30 percent decrease in injuries throughout the company.

For sites that employ Hispanic workers, Torcon contractor supervisors are required to be bilingual, eliminating the need for interpreters, Baukh said. Safety orientation is conducted in both English and Spanish, and written orientation materials are in both languages.

Torcon also posts Spanish-language versions of safety and health posters as well as emergency evacuation procedures. Baukh believes this proactive approach has improved employee relations and client satisfaction.

Baukh said all Torcon projects seek to operate within VPP guidelines, regardless of a Star designation. "We incorporate VPP in every project that we bid. It helps us with the relationships with the unions, tradesmen, contractors and clients. They know what to expect. They know that they can make money on a safe job because the planning is done properly," he said.

Snapshot

Torcon Inc.

Headquarters: Red Bank, NJ

Established: 1965

Primary business:

Construction management

Top executive: Benedict Torcivia, founder, chairman and CEO

Number of employees:

240 direct/1,200 contract