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Construction workers get safety reminders

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Hawaii's construction industry workers have suffered more than 1,000 falls from January 2002 to December 2004, an injury record that is prompting a public-private campaign emphasizing employee safety.

Labor Department officials, contractors and construction unions today will unveil a state-wide effort to urge employees to follow safety procedures and regulations when working at heights above 6 feet.

Violations of fall-protection regulations make up the No. 1 cause of citations issued by state safety officials.

Since January 2004, the Hawaii Occupational Safety and Health division has issued 218 fall-related citations to employers — along with fines that ranged from \$1,500 to \$70,000.

Frustrated construction employers who receive HIOSH citations often point to the safety equipment and training manuals they provide to employees, Hardway said.

So labor officials have aimed their campaign at workers in Hawaii's red-hot construction industry and their families.

"Federal and state law does not include a provision to cite the employee," said James Hardway, spokesman for the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations. "We're trying to find another way to reach these guys and part of that is through the families. When somebody gets injured from a fall, that's a significant impact upon their families. If they're not working, they're not bringing in an income."

The campaign, entitled "Tie Off ... It's Your Life," features four 30-second television commercials, radio spots, a free fall-protection training video and banners and advertisements at shopping centers and University of Hawaii sporting events.

Although the campaign is geared for workers and their families, Bob Dove, CEO and president of HEMIC — the state's largest writer of workers' compensation insurance — wonders why employers aren't doing more to increase safety training, which would lower their workers' comp rates.

Only 7 percent of HEMIC clients have applied for a safety credit for having a written safety program, which would include tie-off procedures for companies that work at heights above 6 feet.

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"It really is pretty frustrating when employers are so intent on saying that workers' compensation rates are too high when they won't do the things that are available to them that could reduce their rates up to 19 percent, and which are all under their control," Dove said.

Dove believes that most HEMIC clients who work at heights always follow safety procedures and regulations. But Dove believes that a few employees might take shortcuts.

"It's human nature," Dove said. "Hypothetically speaking, a worker who has to go up on a scaffold just to do a little bit of repair work or just to do finishing touches for a few minutes might not want to strap on all of the belts and tie off properly. I'm not saying that's prevalent. But it is human nature."

Dino Pertzoff, the owner of World Wide Window Cleaning, regularly includes safety procedures in his weekly meetings with his 29 workers. Like other business owners, Pertzoff said he and his workers have to be particularly safety conscious while working on older buildings that lack state-of-the-art equipment, such as roof anchors and roof rigging.

"Sometimes the only way to do it is to bring hundreds of pounds of weight for a counter-balance," Pertzoff said. "That takes a lot of time and these buildings have only so much money to spend to get their windows clean. I'll tell them the window cleaning is going to be twice the price for us to be safe. But some (competitor) will say, 'We'll just tie off to whatever works.' "

William Hale, the owner of Five Star Roofing, said roofers sometimes get frustrated when following proper safety procedures that they believe can lead to more dangerous situations.

"Envision four or five guys all dragging 20 feet of rope and all working on the same roof going in different directions trying to install concrete tile roofing," Hale said. "The rope gets tied up in the tile and you're creating more of a hazard than you had prior to starting the job."

Hale also includes safety briefings in his weekly staff meetings. He also sends each of his roofers to eight hours of safety training, which costs him \$20 to \$100 per employee.

"They all get warned in our safety meetings every Monday to make sure they tie off their ladders," Hale said. "They have to have their hard hats on. They have to have their fall protection on. But if your man does not put on a rope, they send me the fine, not the employee."

But Hale said he has an overriding reason for emphasizing safety on the job. "You make one mistake and it's over," he said. "I don't want to be the one to call your wife and say you fell off of a roof and you're in the hospital."

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