On July 1, 2015, the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs (FDVA) implemented a new five-point performance expectation dealing with safety accountability.
The expectation evaluates, on a five-point scale, employees’ actions with regard to safety. Among the criteria are participation in the FDVA safety program, safety committee, safety inspections, and job safety analyses. The guidelines also stress the importance of utilizing equipment properly, including personal protective equipment (PPE). High marks are also awarded for those employees who go out of their way to identify potential hazards and risks around the job site, and who recommend solutions to correct these safety lapses. The detailed nature of the expectation, including the examples of best safety practices, gives employees positive, concrete behaviors to emulate; and the quantifiable expectations create a clear set of goals. Additionally, letting employees know that submitting a workers’ compensation claim will not affect their performance evaluations fosters trust and helps ensure accurate reporting.

We spoke to Rebecca Yackel, the Program Administrator/Risk Manager for FDVA, about the creation and implementation of its program. She developed the expectation with input from the FDVA Board of Directors, Human Resources, and administrators up to and including FDVA’s Executive Director, Mike Pendergast. As management buy-in is one of the most crucial aspects in the success of a safety program, FDVA’s program had a solid start.

“I began to roll out the safety performance expectation shortly after July 1, 2015,” said Ms. Yackel. While transitions can be challenging, she has noticed enthusiasm on the part of FDVA employees in discussing the possibilities of the program moving forward, and has found that the toolkit she provided has helped boost employee participation. “Of course, the overall goal is to enhance and elevate the safety and loss prevention program, and to provide a heightened approach to safety in the workplace for all employees,” said Ms. Yackel.

This commitment to safety is especially important given some of the endemic challenges faced by FDVA. “The FDVA workplace is quite diverse… we have 6 state veteran nursing homes and a domiciliary located throughout the state of Florida. In each of these homes and the domiciliary reside elderly veterans who we care for in their time of need. Each facility has multiple departments, including maintenance, dietary, nursing, pharmacy, housekeeping, activities, social service and administration. As you can imagine, some of these departments have some very high-risk tasks the employee may be involved with in the care of our veterans.”

To assist with these challenges, Ms. Yackel and her colleagues provided additional materials to employees, such as an audit tool that allows safety assessment of their immediate work areas as well as a “notice of unsafe condition” that any employee may use to facilitate participation in the safety program. This works in tandem with the performance expectation’s encouragement to identify and rectify workplace dangers. The process is ongoing, as Ms. Yackel is currently working on multiple job safety analysis tools to promote safety for these high-risk tasks. “Each home, domiciliary and division has a safety committee in which FDVA employees may participate. The safety and loss prevention program—as it develops and evolves—will include several new policies and standards, as well as an employee safety manual,” she said.

FDVA’s new five-point performance expectation is a positive demonstration of the emphasis the department has placed on safety. As Ms. Yackel stated, “Safety is everyone’s job. All employees have responsibilities in the area of safety, health, and loss prevention… safety rules are a condition of employment.” She further stresses to employees that accidents are preventable, and that they must report all unsafe conditions and avoid any unsafe job. Finally, she instructs employees to “report all injuries immediately, set a good safety example for other employees, and remember we depend on [them] to keep it safe.” For more information on the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs, visit www.FloridaVets.org.
In the January/February 2015 issue of Safety and Loss Prevention Outlook, we discussed the importance of an ergonomic workspace, and the positive difference that ergonomic work equipment such as standing desks and wrist rests can make. While these accessories can have a great impact on employee wellness, they represent only one half of the ergonomics equation. Proper training and employee instruction is at least as important in reducing workplace discomfort and injuries.

An employee who has been given proper training and who understands the “why” and not just the “how” of proper usage is far more likely to use the equipment correctly, creating a much safer workspace. Here are some tips to make sure your chair is properly adjusted:

- Familiarize yourself with the special features of your chair. Most chairs have several levers or buttons that adjust features such as chair height and lumbar support.
- Place a floor mat on carpeted floors so the chair moves easily. Dragging or pushing the chair across carpet while sitting in the chair can produce unnecessary strain on the chair and your body.
- Adjust the seat height, using the appropriate lever or button. You should adjust the height to allow your feet to rest flat on the floor without any strain on your legs. Take time to find the optimum height.
- Align the lumbar support to the position of most comfort for you. For most chairs, this means raising or lowering the backrest.
- Many ergonomic chairs also have a lever or button which will press the lumbar support slightly forward for those who sit closer to the edge of the seat.

Make other adjustments, if necessary. What feels good at first may not feel right later. Also, keep the chair well-maintained. Check the bolts and screws occasionally to make sure they have not loosened. Check casters and clean them when necessary; casters may collect debris that will prevent them from moving smoothly.

For more information on office ergonomics and how to properly use ergonomic equipment, visit the Mayo Clinic website, at www.mayoclinic.org.
The state of Florida’s business never stops, and neither do its employees. Office buildings often require renovation as the years pass, and new construction is sometimes necessary. Many times, keeping the office open while these enhancements move forward is the best option, but working around construction also poses a number of health and safety risks which must be kept in mind.

As a safety coordinator, it is vital that you work with your administrators and facility managers during times of construction to keep your fellow employees informed of changes and potential hazards. Keep in mind that the impact of construction reaches much farther than just the space occupied by workers and equipment. Communication and careful planning are the keys to keeping offices safe and productive during times of renovation or expansion.

Your first and most important task during times of construction is to think about the ways in which the work will affect your preexisting safety plans.

- Will the construction block building exit routes in the case of a fire?
- Will predetermined meeting areas after an evacuation be inaccessible?
- Think about those in your offices with medical difficulties. If there are specific plans in place for evacuating them in the event of a fire, will the construction interfere with these plans?
- Will the construction affect designated safety zones in the event of a hurricane or other severe weather? If so, new safe areas must be chosen.

After ensuring that the construction will not impede your current safety measures (or amending those measures to account for the construction), it is time to consider new issues that may occur. Let your employees know as soon as possible about any areas of the building or parking lot that will become inaccessible, and make sure that employees are aware of alternate entrances and exits.

In some cases, areas of a building may require remodeling when they are being repurposed, as when storage rooms are converted to office space. These are excellent opportunities to both correct safety issues that currently exist, and prevent new ones from occurring in the future. Work with representatives from the office where the remodeling is to take place to declutter the area in question. If unnecessary and unused files, supplies, and equipment are taking up room and would require being moved, housed during the renovation, and then moved back, consider cleaning house instead, and discarding the buildup of “stuff.” Make sure, of course, to follow all policies on eliminating these items, and to adhere to all retention schedules. Confer with administrators first, as well.

Coordinate with workers and the facilities manager to make sure that all work areas have signage alerting employees of areas affected by the construction. This is especially crucial in offices to which the general public has access. While you are able to communicate via email, in person, or through phone calls with fellow employees, signage is one of the only ways necessary to alerting visitors to potential hazards.

If you see unsafe conditions, such as unsecured extension cords in walkways, or debris in parking lots, let a supervisor know so that the issues can be cleaned up.

Also, keep in mind that the smoke, exhaust, and airborne particulate matter that are sometimes a byproduct of construction can be a danger to employees with respiratory ailments. Communicate in advance to affected employees that such conditions may be present so that they can plan accordingly.

With proper planning and communication, building construction and renovation can create a better workplace for all, while causing only minimal disruption. If you would like to learn more about dealing with disruptions in the workplace, visit the Centers for Disease Control website at http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/indoorenv/constructionieq.html.
Electrical Safety

If it doesn’t look safe, it probably isn’t
The holidays are a stressful time for many people. Cooking huge meals, shopping for gifts, and coordinating a seemingly endless parade of gatherings, parties, and events can prove harrowing. People who do not observe the holidays can find the non-stop barrage of seasonal observances trying as well. Additionally, despite the overarching message presented by the media, life does not stop for the holidays. Bills must be paid, cars need maintenance, and work continues apace. It seems sometimes that a season that has been equated with rest, home, and simple pleasures has become needlessly hectic.

Psychologists have for decades stressed the necessity of self reflection for mental health and happiness. Philosophers have taught that self reflection is vital to discovering who we truly are for thousands of years. Modern science has shown that people who spend some time in self reflection each day, whether meditating, journaling, or just spending quiet time with oneself, are happier, healthier, and report greater satisfaction with their progress in life.

This new year, take some time to reflect on your values, your beliefs, and your goals. Go out of your way to pay attention to your surroundings, as well as your reactions to them. Give thought to what you want to accomplish in the coming year, and in what ways you can improve yourself. Ask yourself questions, like:

- What tasks do I enjoy the most at work, and why?
- Is fear stopping me from pursuing a goal?
- Are certain habits holding me back from doing better?
- Am I too severe in my dealings with people?
- How well do I handle stressful situations?

Give some thought to who and what you are so that you can continue to grow in the new year.
The end of 2015 has seen a great deal of seasonally unusual weather, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) warns that 2016’s conditions may be even more extreme. Due in large part to this year’s exceptionally strong El Niño, the large-scale warming that occurs periodically in the Pacific Ocean, 2016’s weather will likely pose challenges to those who do not plan ahead, and may even prove dangerous.

One of the most noticeable differences has been the unseasonably warm weather the East Coast has experienced in the end of 2015. The new year is forecast to continue inverting norms, with weather patterns in the North projected to be much warmer than normal, while the South will likely see a much colder winter than average starting in January. This means that Florida may see sleet, hail, and icy roads, creating the potential for hazardous driving and property damage. Monitor daily weather forecasts, and try to avoid driving during dangerous, icy conditions if possible. Make sure to move cars and other outdoor items under shelter in the event of hail. Use caution on icy steps and walkways to avoid slips and falls.

The South is also predicted to receive much more rain than in previous years, increasing the likelihood of flash flooding. El Niño generally brings with it a higher incidence of storms, and meteorologists believe that this storm season could rival the 1998 season, which was the strongest on record. Keeping current on developing conditions can help keep you, your family, and your belongings safe. Pass along pertinent weather information such as road closures to your coworkers, and brush up on safety manuals to familiarize yourself with extreme weather procedures. While we do not know exactly what El Niño will bring, proper planning and preparation can mitigate some of its effects.

For more information on extreme weather, visit the NOAA website at [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov).
Newsletter References


CSHEMA (n.d.) cshema.org Annual Conference":  http://www.cshema.org/content.aspx?id=2171

