

Compliance Apathy in Residential Construction is Everyone's Business

Written by Collin Pullar, SCSA President

The residential construction sector continues to be a dangerous realm for workers in Saskatchewan. This August, the Saskatchewan Construction Safety Association (SCSA), in partnership with Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), WorkSafe Saskatchewan, and the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Division of the Ministry of Labour Relations and Workplace Safety identified the most hazardous and critical compliance issues in residential construction based on the results of the 2015 OHS Division's residential construction sites inspections.

Of the 161 Saskatchewan residential worksites inspected, OHS field officers found only 48 per cent of construction workers wearing protective headgear. Additionally, of the 50 per cent of workers who received formal training for fall protection, only 41 per cent were actually using fall protection measures, which include regulatory compliance with covering open holes on worksites.

These numbers paint a very clear picture of widespread apathy among those who have a responsibility to ensure that safety is a priority and regulations are being met. This includes workers, contractors, sub-contractors, supervisors, and the homeowners themselves, who are hiring companies for a new home build or renovation project. The question we are trying to answer here is why practically every other worker on a residential site chooses to gamble with their personal safety.

The problem with risking personal safety some of the time is no different than risking it all of the time. Although this next example comes from a workplace tragedy from a commercial site, it shows that an incident can happen at any time, and no matter the type of workplace, all injuries are predictable and preventable.

Andrew Hann was an apprentice scaffolder working in Saskatchewan who, at the age of 25, fell through an open hole to his death because he was not wearing his fall protection equipment. The details of whether or not Andrew wore his gear some of the time, most of the time, or all of the time, with the exception of that particular shift – doesn't change the reality that he did not have that last line of defense to save his life that day.

As a result, his mother and fiancée will never get to see him again. His daughter, who was born a few months after this tragic occurrence, will also never get to meet her father. There are several other similar stories like Andrew's. Take the story of Kurt Furguson, another Saskatchewan worker who was not wearing any fall protection equipment and fell through an unguarded hole on a residential site. Although he survived, a piece of rebar shattered two vertebrae and injured his spine, leaving him with career-ending injuries at the age of 22.

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– Collin Pullar, SCSA President

What is important for contractors, workers, supervisors, and other stakeholders to keep in mind is that skill and safety are inseparable. The ability to do a job well has everything to do with minimizing risks. Health and safety practices must be interwoven into every task and enforced on a consistent basis.



Continued on Page 8



What I've described here essentially is a safety program or safety management system, which can ensure that every manager and every employee is committed and personally responsible for their own safety and the safety of others.

Understanding a company's mindset around the safety of its employees can determine the quality of the project a homeowner can expect as well. Some of the questions we encourage homeowners to consider when hiring contractors is whether or not the company has a safety management system in place and if they have received Certificate of Recognition (COR®) certification – the national standard in safety.

We also encourage them to inquire if the company has a fall protection plan for any employees working at heights and what they do in case of emergencies. Other important questions to ask are if the company is registered with WCB and if supervision is provided on the worksite.

Every home buyer is looking for a quality home that is built on time, on budget, with zero deficiencies. Choosing a safe builder who is committed to the safety of its workers is a strong indication that the company is methodical and high-performing. If they are willing to take shortcuts with safety, chances are, they are taking shortcuts with their work as well. As I mentioned before, the two are inseparable.

According to the 2015 WCB annual report, the residential sector saw 50 per cent more injuries in comparison to the commercial sector. Although the number of claims are on the decline – there were just over 1,000 claims from 2011-2013; dropping to 775 in 2015 – safety leaders in Saskatchewan agree that this number is still far too high and that more needs to be done to ensure other workers do not become a statistic like Andrew and Kurt.

OHS will be making its rounds again this summer and into the fall; inspecting residential construction sites in the province, looking specifically for unguarded holes and that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is being worn and fall protection equipment is both used and worn.

Whether you are a company owner, a sub-contractor, a worker, a family member of a construction worker, or maybe you're just looking to hire someone to work on your property – remember that safety compliance and risk mitigation is not just about avoiding fines and penalties. Having the mindset that all workplace injuries are preventable and avoidable is what we need to get past this apathy. Safety is not a burden and it's certainly not a hindrance on a business; it's a strategic advantage that makes organizations distinguished and prosperous by virtue of protecting their best assets – their workers.

ABOUT THE SCSA

Collin Pullar is the President of the Saskatchewan Construction Safety Association – An industry driven & funded association serving more than 9,000 member commercial, industrial and residential construction companies in Saskatchewan. Its mission is to provide quality safety training and advice to construction employers and employees that will lead to reduced human and financial loss associated with injuries in the construction industry.

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