

# Tackling Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the Construction Industry

BY CAL BEYER AND DR. SALLY SPENCER-THOMAS

Workers in the construction and extraction industries have a 53.3 per 100,000 rate of suicide, which is second only to workers in the farming, fishing and forest occupational group (84.5 per 100,000), according to statistics released from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on July 1.

Mental health and suicide prevention have been called a “management imperative,” a “missing link” in human capital risk management, and a “vital element” in a company’s safety, wellness and employee benefits program. Yet historically, the construction industry has been characterized by a stoic, tough-guy culture that keeps personal matters out of the workplace.

After generations of this old school mentality, the times are changing as progressive contractors weave mental health and suicide prevention into a dominant “new school” culture. Following are the stories of two construction employers that are leading the movement.

## A Catalyst for Suicide Prevention

Denver-based RK Mechanical has been an industry leader in mental health and suicide prevention. But that’s not exactly what the company is seeking to be. Rather, says Director of Marketing and Communications Heather Gallien, “RK is serving as a catalyst for all other companies to be leaders. The only winning



scenario is an industry-wide commitment to mental health that results in a future permanent decrease in suicides across the entire construction industry.”

RK has instituted many initiatives in the workplace, including:

- integrating mental health awareness with its safety program, such as during daily “stretch and bends” when the entire crew is together;
- leveraging group safety activities by including time to discuss mental health and provide advice and resources to employees;

- positioning mental health and suicide prevention as part of its total benefits package;
- providing an in-house wellness coach; and
- publishing a monthly wellness newsletter that always includes an article on emotional health, as well as suicide prevention resources and information.

“Due to the tough-guy nature of the construction industry, we need to get company leadership bought into the importance of mental health and suicide prevention, and this takes time,” Gallien says. The next challenge is

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“ensuring that our trained leaders are continually mindful about mentioning that it’s OK to seek help for problems at work. This is part of the discipline of creating a culture that proactively and continuously keeps mental health in the daily conversation.

“RK’s leaders are our front line in breaking down the barriers around asking for help.”

#### A Caring Culture That Addresses Mental Wellbeing

Phoenix-based Kortman Electric has been built around caring for its employees since the company’s founding in 1983. As such, its

emphasis on mental health seemed to happen naturally. According to CFO Karl Kortman, the “mental health of all employees is crucial not only for their personal wellbeing, but also for the overall organizational culture.”

To start, Director of Human Resources John Melton personally introduces employees to Kortman’s caring culture during orientation. The company also partners with an outsourced Employee Assistance Program with a dedicated support person who invests several hours each week meeting and working with individuals within the company on a confidential basis. The

service is available 24 hours a day for employees and their families. Support includes individual and family counseling, court support, prison visitation, financial counseling, and officiating weddings and funerals. All of these services are provided at no cost to employees.

“If the company and its leaders and supervisors can provide the support and encouragement before an employee considers suicide, we are providing an atmosphere that allows the employee to thrive in his or her life choices and career,” Melton says.

Adds Kortman: “The mental health of employees may be as important, or even more, than the physical health programs that are provided. Building a caring culture where employees reach out to the company or confidentially to our partner results in healthier employees. As a result, our employees are better suited to provide for themselves and their families. The company has benefited in having a solid team of employees building and maintaining properties to our clients’ satisfaction.” 

*Cal Beyer is director of risk management for Lakeside Industries, Issaquah, Wash. Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas is CEO and co-founder of the Carson J. Spencer Foundation in Denver and an internationally acclaimed authority on mental health and suicide prevention. Beyer and Spencer-Thomas are co-leads for the Workplace Task Force for the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. For more information, email cal.beyer@lakesideindustries.com or sally@carsonjspencer.org.*

## Online Resources



Blueprint for the Construction Industry: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace: [carsonjspencer.org/programs/working-minds/construction-industry-blueprint](http://carsonjspencer.org/programs/working-minds/construction-industry-blueprint)



Man Therapy: [mantherapy.org](http://mantherapy.org)



National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: [actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org](http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org)



National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)



Suicide Prevention Resource Center: [sprc.org](http://sprc.org)



Working Minds: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace: [workingminds.org](http://workingminds.org)