

Supporting staff during a workplace tragedy

Employers often get it right at first, but fail to provide long-term support: Expert

BY ZACHARY PEDERSEN

THE EXPLOSION THAT killed Shirley Hickman's 21-year-old son, Tim, in a workplace accident 16 years ago led to the creation of a charity dedicated to providing support for families who have lost family members to workplace tragedies.

Threads of Life, based in London, Ont., matches families with a volunteer family mentor who helps guide the family through the months following a death.

"I like to think of Threads of Life as the opportunity to help people move from being the victim to the survivor," Hickman says of the organization, which was started in 2003. "When people are ready, we help them take that story and be part of prevention."

When a fatality occurs in the workplace, the first number to be called is obviously 911, says Jeff Dolan, director of investigation services for WorkSafeBC, the workers' compensation board in British Columbia. Employers then have a responsibility to contact the province's workplace compensation board. It will send investigators to visit the site to conduct an investigation, he says.

"They would stay at the site and

maintain control of the site until all of the evidence that is deemed to be relative or appears to be relative is either analyzed at the site or seized for final analysis," he says, adding employers in B.C. are also required to conduct their own internal investigation.

WorkSafeBC also assigns a human factor specialist to every workplace fatality incident. The human factor specialist is an ergonomist by trade and examines the relationship that exists between a worker and his or her environment, Dolan says.

"Why is it that this person thought on this day that was the right thing to do?"

"We would never dismiss an accident as, 'This worker obviously made a mistake and walked into the back of a machine that they shouldn't have,'" says Dolan. "We'd want to trace it back and determine why is it that this person thought on this day that was the right thing to do."

Threads of Life has helped more than 1,400 families, but Hickman's work also leads to her employers and employees who are looking for support after a fatality occurs at a workplace.

"I think what has been learned over the past 20 to 30 years is that co-workers need crisis debriefing as soon

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Prevention council ramps up

Ontario council will help develop safety strategy: Chief prevention officer

BY MELISSA MANCINI

ONTARIO'S NEW PREVENTION council will be George Gritzotis' link to stakeholders, he said.

The council's function will be to advise Gritzotis as the chief prevention officer. It will also help him tap into the stakeholders in the broader workplace community, said Gritzotis, Ontario's first chief prevention

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Leaders play biggest role when tragedy strikes

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as possible,” says Hickman. “The sooner that support is provided to them as a team, the quicker it is for them to return to work right away.”

Ontario’s workplace safety and insurance board has crisis councilors assigned to council employees at workplaces where a fatality has occurred, says Hickman.

B.C. has something similar.

“Within investigations, we do have critical incident specialists who provide that immediate response either to an injured worker or to the family of an injured or deceased worker who are obviously affected by the traumatic incident,” says Dolan. “For someone to receive support from a member of our team, a claim doesn’t have to be initiated for that individual. They can just contact us and have a conversation with one of our specialists and they’ll either be provided with the appropriate services or be referred to somebody who can provide the appropriate services.”

Employees may be dealing with two categories of reaction — there’s trauma and there’s grief, says Brenda Marshall, founder and principal at Solacium Group, an Uxbridge, Ont.-based consulting firm that helps organizations support employees affected by grief.

“Trauma happens whenever there is something that is absolutely horrific, when it seems sudden or random,” Marshall says. “A trauma reaction requires a different type of support than grief. Most (employee assistance programs) would have councilors that are specialized in trauma.”

When it comes to grief, employers do a really good job initially, according to Marshall. They may get councilors in, but they don’t necessarily



Photo: Jazzikov (Shutterstock)

Employees may not begin to grieve until long after a workplace tragedy, says Brenda Marshall, a consultant helping organizations support employees affected by grief.

provide adequate long-term support.

“What we know is grief is a long term process and it’s a normal reaction to loss, so it likely is going to extend for much longer than anybody thinks,” she says, suggesting ongoing educational sessions on reactions to grief and loss may be helpful. “Allow time after where employees, who want to, can stay and talk to the facilitator one-on-one.”

Marshall suggests choosing an individual in the organization who will oversee a disaster relief plan and can check in on any employees who may be suffering. This person can then lead a communication system to keep everyone informed. This individual is often the CEO or a human resources employee because they are equipped with the leadership skills to

manage a support plan during times of grief, she says.

“It’s almost like creating a plan around education that’s ongoing for much longer than anybody thinks they need to,” she says. “The leader of the organization is probably going to have to play a bigger role than they ever have before and so is anyone checking in with them?”

It’s also important for a workplace to consider the victim’s family beyond the legal requirements, Marshall says. She suggests offering a tour of the workplace to the family or offering a recording of the employee’s voicemail message instead of immediately deleting it.

“The extent that you can keep them informed about what’s going to happen on these things can be helpful,” she says. “That voicemail may be the last time they hear their loved one’s voice.”

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Employers should show compassion for grief

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Hickman suggests employers use the victim's name around the office so it's not an uncomfortable subject. She says setting up a scholarship or having a barbecue in memory of the individual can help people who are struggling.

"When (employers) can show the human-compassion side of life by doing something to honour that person's life... their employees realize that their employer is suffer-

ing, too," she says.

Threads of Life holds an annual walk called Steps of Life that allows people who have been affected by a workplace tragedy to walk in memory of the individual who died.

"We have employers who will contact us and tell us they had a fatality," she says. "When people are doing something collectively as a team like that, those co-workers get a chance to reflect, but also to journey forward and recognize that their employer didn't forget about the

worker because of this tragedy."

The key for employers is to show compassion in a difficult situation and stay in touch with victims' families, Hickman says.

"No employer wakes up today and says I'm going to kill a worker," she says. "I think that family members feel best — if there's such a word — about the employer in years to come where the employer has tried to maintain contact. Otherwise the families just feel forgotten and that it was just a life thrown away."

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tion, while the consultants maintained it was one year after their involvement ended.

In *R. v. Corporation (City of Guelph)*, Ontario Court Justice Michael Epstein ruled the limitation period in the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act began to run for the employer at the time of the accident. However, the limitation period began to run much earlier for the architect and engineer involved in the construction project as they hadn't provided advice for years after construction and their involvement wasn't a "continuing offence."

■ PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

First aid rules changing for P.E.I. employers

CHARLOTTETOWN — Amendments to Prince Edward Island's occupational health and safety (OHS) regulations relating to first aid will come into force on Jan. 31, 2013, the province's Workers Compensation Board has announced.

The amendments will put additional measures in place to protect workers and employers.

Some of the upcoming regulation changes include the following:

- First aid requirements for low hazard workplaces, including train-

ing requirements for first aid providers.

- In workplaces not considered to be low hazard, a first aid room will be required where there are 100 or more workers per shift.

- First aid providers will be required in workplaces with less than five workers.

- Workplaces with as few as one worker will require a first aid kit.

■ MANITOBA

Manitoba moves to streamline technical safety legislation

WINNIPEG — Manitoba is asking for public input to improve the legislation governing the safety of technical equipment such as boilers, electrical installations and elevators.

The review has a number of key goals:

- modernizing safety standards
- consistent treatment of stakeholders across industry and sectors
- simplifying and consolidating
- creating consistent appeal mechanisms
- creating a legislative framework ensuring public safety.

Enforcement will also become more consistent, as the penalties for contraventions and enforcement mechanisms currently vary from one act to the next.

The full discussion paper is available at www.firecomm.gov.mb.ca.

Manitoba launches spiritual health-care strategic plan

WINNIPEG — Manitoba has released Health and the Human Spirit, the province's new spiritual health-care strategic plan.

The plan was informed by a spiritual health-care strategic planning session involving a range of community and professional stakeholders, spiritual care providers, volunteers, counsellors, physicians, psychiatrists, policy analysts and individuals who have experienced spiritual care in a health-care context.

"We now have seven spiritual health-care co-ordinators across the province to help connect patients and families with the spiritual supports they need, a unique-in-Canada provincial spiritual health-care co-ordinator and legislation that enshrines the special role of faith-based organizations in our health-care system," said Health Minister Theresa Oswald.

A four-year work plan is under development. The plan will include a province-wide spiritual health-care volunteer education course, core competencies for spiritual health-care practitioners and the incorporation of traditional Aboriginal healing space at a number of health facilities.