

Planning Training Exercises

BACKGROUND

The injured worker, a paid firefighter with 16 years of service, sustained an injury while performing an extrication training exercise.

The injury occurred during a planned extrication drill that required the set up and use of hydraulic rams. Because the department had several calls for service that day, the training officer did not have the time to establish a formal written training plan or perform a safety review of the training. The extrication drill took place in a sloped and sandy parking lot, using a donated vehicle with four different sized tires.

The training officer, being conscious of the shift hours and trying to save on overtime expenses, asked the Engine Company members to perform a training evolution before the end of their shift. The Engine Company accommodated the request and began the extrication of a “victim” from the vehicle. Because the training officer was called to another meeting, he asked the engine officer, a Lieutenant, to oversee the training. The Engine Company officer directed the injured worker to set up the hydraulic rams and begin “rolling” the dashboard. In an effort to complete the evolution expeditiously, the injured worker did not properly secure the rams and did not “size up the scene and ensure scene safety” – noting the vehicle had four tires of all different sizes and was located on a slope with sand underneath the tires. As the injured worker began to engage the rams, the vehicle began to slip, causing the rams to disengage from the vehicle. In an effort to prevent the rams from falling onto his legs, the injured worker reached out abruptly to catch the rams. He then slipped and twisted his back, immediately felt the onset of lower back pain, which radiated down his right leg. The incident was reported immediately to the Engine Lieutenant and the injured employee was directed to be seen by the department’s Initial Care Provider. He was placed on temporary total disability and diagnosed with an acute lower-back sprain.

The injured worker was later evaluated by an orthopedic physician, given a referral for a short course of physical therapy, and released for transitional duty. Subsequently, while descending stairs at home, his right leg gave way, causing him to fall down the steps. He was admitted to the hospital, where admitted for four days. Post discharge, the injured continued to experience leg pain with associated numbness and tingling. Following a 16-week period of transitional duty, pain management treatment, and physical therapy, a surgical recommendation was made to address his lumbar issues, which the injured worker declined.

Prior to this injury, the injured worker had experienced eight prior work-related lower back injuries, the most significant necessitated a lumbar spine decompression surgery and two lumbar spine fusions. A 38% permanent partial disability rating was given following his surgeries.

INVESTIGATION AND DAMAGES/INJURY

The Fire Chief and department administration confirmed that the injury occurred on a training assignment which the Fire Company was directing.

There was insufficient planning for this drill, as a formal written training curriculum and safety plan were not drafted, and a lack of supervision. There were also hazardous actions performed by each member of the engine company as they were all “rushed” to complete the training before the end of the shift.

As a result, neither the Engine Company officer nor the injured employee identified the hazards associated with the scene and did not ensure scene safety prior to starting the evolution.

CIRMA LIABILITY ASSESSMENT

CIRMA is 100% responsible for this work-related training claim. The reserves on this claim were significant given the prior history of work-related lower back injuries, surgeries, and pre-existing medical conditions. Although the injured worker eventually resumed working in a full duty capacity, there was significant future exposure in the event another low back injury were to occur. Given the future exposure, CIRMA settled this case on a full and final, global basis. The total cost of this claim was over \$350,000.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Training should be pre-planned, include objectives, and incorporate both functional and cognitive skills. The planning should include a step-by-step process in achieving the training goals, including steps to avoid injury.
2. A training checklist should be completed to support all steps of the training, to include attendance, accountability, placement of safety officer, start and end times, whether training is hazardous.
3. The training site and any objects or items should be free from sand and debris. The tires on the vehicle should match or be deflated to ensure stability.
4. Staff should be briefed on training expectations and intended results.
5. All potential safety issues should be identified and reviewed.
6. Equipment and operations should be inspected prior to use.
7. The senior member, the one with the most knowledge, should assist in providing direction to the junior member, person learning the procedure, in the placement of tools.

Questions on this topic? Ask your Supervisor or contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant at (203) 946-3700.