

Seasonal Employee Safety

Background

Seasonal employment programs often hire high school and college-aged young adults on a temporary basis to assist with projects throughout the organization. They are mutually beneficial to the employee, who gains valuable work experience, and to the employer, who gains an expanded workforce throughout the busy summer months. Although they are only employed with the school district for a short time, seasonal employees can pose a significant Workers' Compensation exposure if they are misused or unsupervised. An analysis of seasonal-employee injuries indicates that there are areas of improvement and measures that public schools can take to prevent injury to seasonal staff.

Scenario

The claimant is a 21 year-old, part-time seasonal custodial employee with the school district. On the day of the incident, the claimant and his co-worker were directed by their supervisor on-site to sit against large, heavy tables in the back of a box truck while another co-worker drove the vehicle to another job site a mile down the road. While en route, the truck took a sharp right turn, causing approximately six or seven tables, with an estimated total weight of 600 pounds, to fall onto the claimant. The claimant's body folded in a forward flexed position with the weight of the tables on top of him, pinning him for several seconds.

Damages. The claimant, who had no prior history of injuries or illness, was taken to the hospital the next day where it was found that he suffered a compression fracture of the L4 vertebrae. The injury resulted in a four-month period in which the claimant was totally disabled from work at his school district job and at his concurrent employment with a private landscaping company. Although surgery was not performed, the claimant received extensive medical treatment and was ultimately assigned a 10% permanent partial disability rating to his back. Claim costs totaled \$157,000.

Key Recommendations. By implementing the programs below, municipalities will be able to reduce preventable accidents and exposures.

Lessons Learned

Do not allow passengers in the back of trucks during transport. Industry best practice is to never allow passengers to ride in the cargo area while the vehicle is moving. Instead, secure the load in the back of the truck with appropriate equipment, as necessary. Consider creating a policy that employees must secure equipment in transit and regularly train all employees to this policy.

Identify areas of improvement at the supervisory level. This incident is partially the result of a lack of judgment from the on-site supervisor. Continue to train and educate supervisors on how to effectively communicate with and manage staff. Hold supervisors accountable.

Train seasonal employees. Seasonal employees often go through an accelerated orientation program compared to full-time staff. This, coupled limited work experience, often leads to a lack of understanding on the how's and why's of employee safety. It is important to train all staff on department policies and procedures, including the program on vehicle use.

For more information on this topic, please contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant. Visit CIRMA.org for a list of current training programs and e-Learning Center courses.