



Member Spotlight

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Safety in Stanislaus

When Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Don Gatti joined the team at Stanislaus County Office of Education five years ago on-the-job injuries were both more frequent than they should have been and more severe.

Their employees were exposed to a wide variety of risks – the usual maintenance and grounds services dangers – as well as more specialized workplace hazards that come with working with special education students and troubled youth.

Since that time, through restructuring, the creation of a dedicated Safety Coordinator position, and the development of an agency-wide safety committee, Gatti and the SCOE staff have seen a marked improvement – not just in their claim statistics but in the attitude surrounding safety in general.

A large part of that turnaround can be attributed to Trudy Silveira – SCOE's Safety Coordinator since the position's inception – and Safety Administrative Assistant Nina Nguyen.

Silveira stressed she is no "heavy hitter" in the safety world and she's taken a softer tack that she calls the Mother Teresa approach – going one person at a time.

She met with teachers and other staff and explained she wasn't asking them to not do the things their job required, she was just asking they do them safely. For SCOE's special education teachers, that meant wearing safety glasses, hearing protection and in some cases, even chest guards to protect them from injuries. They delved into the world of ergonomics, conducted back safety training in the classroom and even had a physical therapist visit classrooms to observe teachers in action prior to a full on training with them. An aggressive return to work program was also implemented.

"The awareness that we could prevent some of these injuries and reduce the severity of others, gave morale a shot in the arm," Silveira said. Injury was no longer considered inevitable and during the first year of the program, injuries dropped by 50 percent. They began to see cost savings almost immediately.

"You can't afford not to emphasize safety," Gatti said. "We would be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars more if safety was not a priority."

(cont.)

Member Spotlight is designed to highlight innovative and/or successful risk management efforts in member agencies. These spotlights run in our quarterly newsletter, *SELF Awareness*, and can be found on our website. If you know a district or college that you'd like to see featured, please e-mail us at info@selfjpa.org.



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They have integrated safety into everything they do and have had the support from the Superintendent down to craft their plan and implement it. The program receives funds – about \$25,000 - from Central Region Schools Insurance Group, SCOE's primary JPA, and Business Services augments that budget, with a goal of the program eventually paying for itself.

The Safety Committee determines how the money is spent with the objective of reaching as many people as possible. During Health and Safety Month, they invested in baskets filled with healthy snacks that Silveira hand delivered to SCOE's 36 work sites.

"People are aware of us (now), they know when they have an injury we come to see them," she said. "I'd rather go see them with a fruit basket than a clip board and a camera."