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OSU-OSHA Safety Day: VPP in Construction

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Only 16 construction companies in Ohio and 23 in OSHA Region V currently are in OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP), according to Dave Wilson, assistant area director for OSHA's Columbus, Ohio, office. But at the OSU-OSHA Safety Day on Jan. 27, dozens of attendees gathered to learn more about VPP for construction and to hear one safety director's experience with the application process.

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The Ohio State University (OSU) and the Columbus, Ohio, OSHA office hosted this fourth annual safety day on the OSU campus, attracting roughly 300 safety professionals, workers and OSU students. Wilson led the "VPP in Construction" session jointly with Meg DeWerth, the safety director for Continental Building Systems (CBS), a commercial construction company, to share her company's experiences earning VPP status.

According to DeWerth, working toward VPP status forced CBS to continually improve programs. "It pushed the envelope and made us try to do better and better," she explained. "We didn't do it to get something. It's the next natural progression of who we are. It's really a matter of the heart for us because it's not just a program ... it's part of the culture."

The basic tenants of VPP, Wilson said, focus on individual worksites, performance-based criteria, effective safety and health management criteria and continuous improvement. All programs must be in place for at least 1 year before a company should apply. And while some companies might be intimidated by the process, DeWerth and Wilson stressed that it's not an insurmountable goal.

"You're not reinventing the wheel," Wilson said. "One of the things we look for is continuous improvement. You've got to show us year after year you're continually improving your programs."

Safe, Not Perfect

When DeWerth first started considering the VPP application, she was concerned OSHA

would expect CBS to be perfect.

“Well, let’s face it, you’re not going to be perfect,” she admitted. “No one’s going to be perfect in safety. That’s why continuous improvement is so important.”

According to DeWerth, OSHA gives some leeway in the VPP process. Even if OSHA officers notice a problem during a site visit, they will take into account the broader systems in place to determine how the company performs instead of focusing exclusively on the one mistake. DeWerth described the process as “respectful” and expressed appreciation for that leeway.

Wilson confirmed that above all, OSHA expects companies to have good systems in place. “We’d like you to be safe, not perfect. If we went to a place where there were no problems at all, I’d wonder if you did any work or if you staged all of this,” he joked.

He added that imperfect injury or illness rates also shouldn’t hold companies back from applying. “Even if your rates are a little high, you can get in the program as a Merit site, not a Star site. You just have to be committed to lowering [the rates],” he said.

And remember, OSHA is there to help. “We’ll work with you all the way,” Wilson stressed. “We’ll make sure when you’re ready to turn in the application, you’re really ready to turn it in. We’re proud for companies that get in, we’re happy for companies to get in.”

DeWerth agreed. “You’re not on an island feeling like you’re doing all this by yourself,” she said.

The benefits of working toward VPP status appear to make up for any application anxiety. Applying for and participating in the VPP program can help companies who might be reactive to safety instead become proactive, Wilson said, among other benefits.

“If you try to go for it, the only thing you’re going to do is improve your safety and health program,” he explained. “You might decide it’s for you, you might decide it’s not, but your employees are going to be more involved in safety and health than ever before.”

Training and Accountability

“The worst thing in construction is hazards change daily, sometimes hourly. That’s why making sure your employees can recognize hazards is so important,” Wilson said. “Everybody in your company needs to be trained on some level in safety and health.” CBS, for example, requires executive management to complete OSHA 10-hour training every 3 years, while field staff must take the 30-hour course every 3 years.

In addition, it’s vital that a company’s subcontractors understand VPP, DeWerth said. “When OSHA comes out and starts asking the mason’s laborer about VPP, they need to at least be able to explain how [CBS] addresses safety. So we try very hard to get our subcontractors up to speed,” she explained. “We’ve got wallet fold-out cards and four main elements on why we’re doing it. We really wanted our subcontractors to understand we’re on the same team.”

In the end, companies interested in applying for VPP must be willing to improve, work with OSHA, and ask for the help they need. “You can make the application process hard or easy

for yourself," Wilson said.

"It's not easy," DeWerth interjected. "Don't let him fool you."

Vaugh Industries Earns VPP Star Status

Marc Greer, safety director for Vaughn Industries, an electrical, mechanical and high voltage contractor that also was a sponsor of the 2009 OSU-OSHA Safety Day, spoke to *EHS Today* after the session to share his own thoughts on the VPP process.

This Carey, Ohio-based company received OSHA VPP Star Status in September 2008, an achievement that was the culmination of a broad-sweeping effort to improve the company's safety performance. After experiencing a workplace fatality in 2003 and beginning the work to change culture and encourage employee ownership in 2004, Vaughn has steadily improved its safety performance over the years. According to Greer, the VPP application process confirmed that the company's hard work in improving safety over the years was paying off.

"I learned that what we were implementing was working," he said, and that OSHA recognized the company's processes were exceptional.

Greer added, however, that the extent a particular company is able to interact with and hold subcontractors accountable during this process is "intangible." A company performing private work and using the same subcontractor on a regular basis may have more options when it comes to training and communicating certain VPP aspects compared to companies working on public bids, he explained.

In any case, Greer said it is "wonderful to see that people are taking the effort to move forward" by working toward VPP status in the construction industry.

"Our people are our greatest resource," Greer said of Vaughn Industries employees. "That means allowing them the time to do the job right."

And if contractors also put in the time and effort to complete an application and work with OSHA, they just might be rewarded with VPP status of their own.

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