

# It's All About Safety

By STEVE FELLMAN, TAUC GENERAL COUNSEL

**L**AST FALL, I attended NMAPC's annual Zero Injury Safety Awards dinner and was awed by the ever-increasing number of hours worked without a reportable injury in our industry. Five tripartite teams (made up of owner-client, contractor and labor unions) reported projects where between 500,000 and one million hours were worked without a reportable injury, and two teams reported projects where more than one million hours were worked without a reportable injury!

I remember talking about the improvements that the construction industry has made in providing a safe work environment with an old-time Ironworker journeyman. He said that you could see the difference every time you went to the hiring hall: "All the guys sitting on the bench had all their fingers."

We are a country committed to safety in the workplace. Owners demand that contractors follow a rigid safety protocol. Contractors and unions work together to ensure that job sites are equipped with the best safety equipment and employees are trained to work safely. Federal and state OSHA inspectors monitor the workplace to make sure that contractors meet the government's stringent regulations. Employees are empowered to act to prevent unsafe practices. Mandatory drug testing programs are required. And as shown by the ZISA winners and industry and government statistics, the construction industry's safety record over the past several decades has seen marked improvement. This is yet another area where

tripartite collaboration has resulted in strong, positive accomplishments. There is no question that when a construction worker leaves his house in the morning to work on a construction site, his chances of returning home that evening without an injury are better than ever before.


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New technologies are also enhancing jobsite safety. Drones are being used to conduct safety inspections and will soon be delivering small parts and materials to the job site. 3D printers can build parts on the job site or at a nearby location for quick delivery. Innovative computer programs and powerful laptops enable change orders to be designed at the job, circulated to all the necessary parties and approved in a few short hours.

So everything looks good, right? Well...let's look at the other side of the coin.

As much as we have improved workplace safety, we have been ineffective in addressing safety *outside* of the workplace. We live in a society that has become accustomed to violence in shopping centers, airports, public schools, government buildings... the list goes on. Even in

upscale suburban neighborhoods, parents are afraid to let their kids walk to school or drop a group of kids off at a museum or movie theater unless they are monitored by an adult. When you go on a trip, you are told "travel safely." Last year I attended a business meeting in Belgium and noticed a large man standing outside the meeting room for most of the day. I asked the host of the meeting, a high-ranking employee of a U.S. company, if he knew why the large man was standing there and was told that the host hired a personal security person to be with him whenever he travels outside the United States.

So what's my point? Simple: we have proven that by working together, all of the interested parties – owner, contractor and unions – can improve workplace safety and literally change the environment of a jobsite where injuries were once an almost daily occurrence. Now we need to take what we have learned in the workplace and apply that knowledge and experience to our everyday lives. We owe it to our children and our grandchildren. The government cannot be relied upon to do it for us. How about a construction industry initiative that goes beyond the confines of the workplace – maybe "Let's Make America Safe Again"? 



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