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WORKER SAFETY

Construction industry confronts suicide in the ranks

By Don McIntosh

The numbers are jolting. Construction workers commit suicide at three times the national average. More American construction workers die by suicide than from job site injuries or accidents. Construction has the second highest suicide rate of any industry.

Why? There's no one answer, just a combination of risk factors: a predominately male workforce, more veterans and gun-owners, chronic pain from the work and higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse, frequent travel and separation from family, and a "too tough to talk" culture where it can be seen as weak to share feelings or reach out for help.

Hoping to prevent more suicides, a number of local unions have lately joined forces with construction companies. The project is called the Construction Suicide Prevention Partnership and it's coordinated by a local non-profit group, Lines for Life.

The effort starts by teaching union reps, supervisors, and co-workers to recognize the warning signs of suicide, and how to get help for someone in crisis. They use a training program called



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QPR, which stands for Question, Persuade, and Refer. It's meant to be like CPR, turning bystanders into lifesavers. The training isn't intended to make anybody a therapist, but it prepares them to have a conversation and connect the person to the necessary resources to help them through a tough spot or even a crisis moment.

Local unions have offered the QPR trainings for members, including IBEW Local 48, Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, and Carpenters Local 1503. Increasingly there's talk of including the training in union apprenticeship programs.

"I would advise everybody to get QPR training, and I kind of hope that it's gonna wash across the nation," said Laborers Local 737 recording secretary Jodi Guetzloe-Parker, who took the training. Guetzloe-Parker said her interest in suicide prevention was triggered by the suicide of

someone she knew, a well-liked member of Iron Workers Local 29. "It was just like a punch to the gut."

Steven Frost, a safety manager for the general contractor Howard S. Wright, has led QPR trainings since August 2020.

"Having been in more than a tough spot in my life, I understand what it feels like to not know the way out," Frost said via email. In response to what he calls a "quiet epidemic," Frost developed a series of toolbox talks for use on construction job sites—to address mental health and suicide prevention.

September is Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month. General contractor Andersen Construction will be organizing toolbox talks about suicide prevention on all of its construction job sites, said Christina Ewing, the company's wellness and benefits manager. Ewing said Andersen will also have all its supervisors take the QPR training over the next six months.

Andersen Construction is also offering the QPR training free via Zoom each Friday through the month of September. Visit nwlaborpress.org/qpr for links to register.

THE EPIDEMIC

A SNAPSHOT OF
SUICIDE IN AMERICA

33.1% ↑

INCREASED SUICIDE RATE IN U.S.
(2019)

10TH

LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH
(2019)

2ND

CAUSE OF DEATH AGE GROUP 20-34
(2019)

4TH

CAUSE OF DEATH AGE GROUP 35-54
(2019)

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CORRECTIONS

Trump/Trumka. In our Aug. 20 issue, an article about the life of the late AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka said he criticized "Trumka" for antiunion appointments and for cutting taxes on the wealthy and corporations. It meant to say that Trumka criticized President Trump for those things.



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