



June 2016

By Jake Oatess\*

## **Total Worker Health Webinar**

On Wednesday, June 15th, Charlotte Halverson gave a webinar talking about the Total Worker Health program. She works for AgriSafe as a certified occupational health nurse and has spent many years in community education as well as the hospital care setting. Along with nursing, she has a background in management and delivery of business and community health services. Charlotte is active in a variety of professional organizations and works to promote agricultural safety and health at both the regional and national level.

In June of 2011, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) put into action the Total Worker Health program that has been viewed as an evolution from both of NIOSH's former programs, Steps to a Healthier U.S. Workforce and the Worklife Initiative. The Total Worker Health program is defined as policies, programs, and practices that install protections against work-related dangers and health hazards with the promotion of both injury and illness prevention techniques to increase worker well-being. By integrating workplace interventions that protect the safety and health of the workers, employers are able to increase the wellbeing of everybody who is on site. Past occupational safety and health protection programs have mostly concentrated on attempting to make work safe and keep workers protected on the job. Total Worker Health builds on that concept by recognizing that the work environment affects overall health and that it also impacts job related factors. Some different ways that the work environment impacts the worker's wellbeing over all is through wages, hours of work, stress caused by work, and interactions with others in the workplace. In the agricultural industry, the Total Worker Health program has been dubbed Total Farmer Health as it has been used to increase the safety and security of all farmers.

Agriculture consistently ranks in the top three occupations that have the highest rate of either a disabling injury or death. There are many risk factors that agricultural employees face on a daily

**PO Box 2506  
Leesburg, VA  
571-293-1908**

basis that can lead to someone being wounded.<sup>1</sup> To prevent this, and to begin to see a movement in the right direction towards safer workplace conditions, the first dollar investment made must address hazardous issues in the work environment. Only after those safeguards have been put into place can we begin to move towards the goal that Total Worker Health strives to achieve. There are five different options when it comes to eliminating or mitigating these dangers: elimination, substitution, engineering control of hazards, administrative control of hazards, or personal protection equipment to protect you from them. Elimination is defined as totally removing or designing a risk out of a system while substitution is seen as replacing the hazard with a non-hazard. An example of the elimination of a hazard would be the use of cellphones while driving. 26% of all crashes that occur in the agricultural industry are attributable to distraction caused by being on the phone. We could totally eliminate this risk if we removed cell phones from this situation. Of course totally removing the hazard is not always a viable option, that is where the other three options come in. Engineering control of the situation is isolating or diminishing the hazard as much as possible while administrative control is utilizing training, schedules, and signage to best decrease risk. An example of engineering control of a hazard would be installing ROPS on to tractors. 23% of all fatal deaths in the agricultural industry can be attributed to machinery, the large majority being made up of tractors. Adding rollover protection structures would diminish this problem greatly. Personal protective equipment also can be used to best lower the danger of a situation and may sometimes be the only feasible option.

The Total Worker Health program created a guide called the Essential Elements of Workplace Programs where components of this program are divided into a four step process. The first step is focused on organizing culture and leadership. It focuses on creating effective programs that encourage active worker participation, input, and involvement. It also calls for the demonstration of leadership by showing a commitment from employers to worker health and safety as well as having supervisor and managers at all levels getting involved and promoting this health program. The second part of this guide is known as the program design. It focuses on these eleven steps to create the best outcome: establishing clear principles, integrating relevant systems, eliminating recognized hazards, being consistent, promoting employee participation, tailoring programs to the diverse needs of workers, considering incentives, finding and using the right tools, adjusting the program as needed, making sure the program lasts, and establishing confidentiality. If you attempt to mold your Total Worker Health program around this guide you will, more likely than not, succeed. Program implementation is the next step in this Essential

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://ncaeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Risk-Factors-and-the-Agricultural-Industry.pdf>

**PO Box 2506  
Leesburg, VA  
571-293-1908**

Elements guide. Starting smart, providing adequate resources to employees, building accountability in the program, and rewarding success are all important during implementation. One of the most important parts of this step though is how you communicate. Tailoring messages to individual groups, making sure that message is consistent, communicating early and often along while providing updates will make the implementation of this program much easier. The last step of this process is the program evaluation. Making sure to measure and analyze changes in different figures such as injury rates, turnover rates, costs of production, and different factors like that will demonstrate to you how successful or unsuccessful the program has ended up being. Making sure to evaluate the whole process and project as well as learning from the experience will make the next time around that much easier and even more successful than the first.

The benefits of having a wellness program, especially in the agricultural industry where risk factors are higher than almost any other profession, are tremendous. Employers have been affected by increasing costs recently that have stemmed from providing health care insurance, lost time from injuries, and chronic health issues. Recent studies that have been conducted show that over 50% of profits go towards supporting health care benefits compared to 10% just thirty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Health programs such as Total Worker Health are great tools to lower these costs, generate more profit, and promote increased safety in the workplace.

For more information regarding NIOSH and their Total Worker Health Program please visit the program webpage at the Center for Disease Control website at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/>, the AgriSafe website at <http://www.agrisafe.org/>, the OSHA website at <http://www.osha.gov/>, and the EPA website at <http://www.epa.gov/>.

\*Jake Oatees served as Summer Intern for ASHCA part-time in June & July 2016.

---

<sup>2</sup> [eresources.com/articles](http://eresources.com/articles) ..... Sullivan, S.

**PO Box 2506  
Leesburg, VA  
571-293-1908**

**PO Box 2506  
Leesburg, VA  
571-293-1908**