

Summer jobs come with safety risks for young employees

BY TATIANA WALK-MORRIS

Summer job season is in full swing, with the influx of younger workers creating workplace safety challenges for employers.

Broadly speaking, workers between the ages of 14 and 24 are likely to injure themselves on the job because of their inexperience as well as their physical, cognitive and emotional developmental characteristics, according to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

From April to July 2017, the number of employed 16- to 24-year-olds increased by 1.9 million to 20.9 million, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In 2016, 13 workers under the age of 16 died from occupational injuries out of a total of 5,190 fatalities, according to bureau data. Seventeen workers between the ages of 16 and 17 died on the job that year, compared with 43 in the 18-to-19 age group and 310 workers aged 20 to 24, according to bureau data.

Employers hiring young employees should take steps to reduce the injury and illness risk to this group, experts say. For example, employers should ensure these young employees have the proper licenses for the tasks they are hired to perform, including drivers' licenses given the risk of driving-related fatalities for this age group. Younger employees working at landscaping companies or recreational centers, for example, may be transporting equipment or other people, so employers need to conduct a driving background check, said Woody Dwyer, second vice president of workers compensation, risk control at Travelers Cos. Inc. based in Hartford, Connecticut.

For summer camps, counselors need to have lifeguard certifications, rifle training, archery training and other preparation for various outdoor activities, said Jim Chalmers, vice president of Chalmers Insurance Group based in Bridgton, Maine.

Employers must rethink their training methods because asking workers to watch 15- to 20-minute videos in a classroom or online is ineffective in his experience, said Eric Voight, vice president and assistant director of risk control at Conner Strong & Buckelew based in Marlton, New Jersey. Interactive training is ideal for younger workers, millennial workers in particular, because they like to know the rationale behind rules rather than older workers who are "more accustomed to an authoritarian teaching style," Mr. Voight said in a follow-up email.

Some employers assume that an orientation is enough, but young workers across many sectors require separate safety training to understand all the risks involved with a particular job, Mr. Dwyer said. Retail workers, for example, might fall off a ladder, get hit in the head by falling inventory or suffer from lacerations when handling inventory, he said. While working outdoors, new landscapers should be taught to look for signs of heat stress. Food service workers are more susceptible to burns or slips and falls, Mr. Dwyer added.



“Don’t assume that they have the same safety expectations as you,” Mr. Dwyer said. “You need to make sure (workers) have an understanding of the risk and what are our procedures.”

It’s important for employers to create a safety-first work environment from the beginning, coaching newer workers as they become acquainted with the job, said Erin Cullen, the New York-based customer group president of ProSight Global Inc. General contractors are incentivized to complete jobs on schedule, and newer workers mistakenly think that they can cut corners to complete tasks, but employers must urge all of their workers — their new workers especially — to follow their older colleagues, Ms. Cullen said.

Young employees may come into the worksite and want to perform the job more efficiently, Ms. Cullen said. “It’s kind of that millennial mindset of ‘I can figure this out,’” she said. “We’re actually seeing younger workers having more injuries on-site because they’re choosing to not follow protocol in some scenarios.”

For construction sites, new wearable technologies can be used for older and younger workers alike, but they’re especially useful for shortening the learning curve for younger and inexperienced seasonal workers while lessening the time spent looking after new employees, said Martin Frappolli, director of knowledge resources at The Institutes Risk and Insurance Knowledge Group in Malvern, Pennsylvania. These tools can alarm workers when they are about to enter the wrong zone, detect slips and falls, and notify them when they need to evacuate, Mr. Frappolli added.

In the construction space, Mr. Dwyer recommended pairing younger workers with more experienced workers — those with at least five to 10 years of experience — and giving them a distinctive hard hat or T-shirt so veteran workers can keep an eye on them.

Employers also need to ensure that young employees have the proper clothing and equipment, particularly when working outdoors. Youth camp counselors, for example, must wear the proper footwear — no flip-flops — to avoid slips and falls while hiking, Mr. Chalmers said. It is also critical for counselors to take adequate breaks on or off campgrounds, he said.

“We all need a few minutes to rest and relax,” Mr. Chalmers said. “Rest, hydration — all of those keep your energy levels up for working with kids.”

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