



New York State School Safety Group 491

Safe Schools Agenda

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A monthly service provided to help you with your efforts to make your school safe for students, staff and the public

Reduce Insurance Costs by Managing Injury Recovery

Employee absences caused by injuries on the job as well as off the job affect the premiums for Workers' Compensation insurance as well as Health Insurance, which most school districts subsidize to a substantial extent. There are other costs too, for substitutes, training, administrative time, etc., which are hidden but very real. With the ever rising costs of medical services, it just doesn't make sense to take a passive approach to the management of injury recovery and getting injured employees back to work.

Getting an injury recovery program together, like most management issues, will require a commitment of time and resources. The first step will be to create a written return-to-work program that defines the roles and responsibilities of the organization, the supervisor, the injured employee, and his/her doctor. The policy should establish return-to-work criteria for different positions as well as circumstances under which they may return. A written policy that is understood by all the players in advance of a specific injury event makes it easier to be consistent.

The second step is to develop written descriptions of the physical demands of each position. These are important also for use in making hiring decisions. Start with those positions that have experienced the greatest frequency of injuries in the past, and develop statements for other positions over time. The best way to do this is to bring in an expert in the field.

The third step is to re-think your relationship with the employee's physician. Experts advise that, contrary to popular opinion, employers do have a right to communicate with physicians about the workplace, regardless of where the injury occurred. The key is to discuss with the doctor the impairment or limitations the person has and the restrictions that need to be accommodated. Provide the doctor with the job demand analysis for that position so that his/her decision on return-to-work will rely on more than a vague idea of the physical demands of the job.

The fourth step is to develop meaningful and appropriate modified duty and/or part-time duty work assignments. Be prepared to provide these to the doctor, and to sit down and discuss the return-to-work scenario for the individual.

The fifth step is to develop a pro-active plan for monitoring disabilities. Become very familiar with the case management practices of your insurance carriers and let them know what you expect of them. Make advocacy for care of employees the priority for the case managers as well as the supervisors. If your organization is large enough, examine the cost/benefit of assigning a nurse to follow up and advocate for treatment of injured employees.

The potential payback for managing injury recovery is huge, both financially and in terms of employee and organizational well-being.

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Risk Communication Insights

Much has changed in school risk management since 9/11, not the least of which is the importance of being better prepared for the challenges of communicating with school publics in the event of terrorist events and other emergencies. When such an event occurs, time is short, expertise on the causing agent is often scarce, and the demand for information by the public and by staff can be overwhelming for the unprepared. Failure to respond quickly can create additional risk-taking based on rumors and confusion as well as the loss of confidence in school leadership.

The Incident Command System that most schools have adopted anticipates possible scenarios, assigns responsibilities, and provides for the development of materials and strategies before an incident occurs. (See www.Bowmac.com.) Recent events indicate that the best laid plans for handling emergency events are under-appreciated by concerned parents and civic officials when risk communications fall short. The Pre-Event Message Development Project conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH) provides critical insights on what school publics need to know in the event of critical incidents. (See www.biosecurityjournal.com for reports on this project.) Although the project is concerned with public health agency reaction to biological and chemical terrorist events, the research methods and findings may be helpful to all who are in the process of updating their Incident Command Systems.

The Project gathered data on the views and information needs of potential audiences. Fifty-five focus groups with more than 500 people were conducted across the country, with the majority of the groups being members of the general public.

They were asked to respond to hypothetical threat scenarios, eliciting information on emotional responses to the threat, knowledge, behavioral response, information seeking, preferred information sources, and the adequacy of draft information materials. Focus groups made up of staff members were also asked about their professional roles and concerns.

The focus groups demonstrated that a terrorist attack would create a great deal of fear and feelings of helplessness. Some of the implications for risk communication:

- ✓ Message materials should answer key questions such as the nature of the threat, protective actions that should be taken, and steps being taken to apprehend perpetrators.
- ✓ Message materials should include materials which give individuals action steps which provide them a sense of being in control.
- ✓ Message materials should be easily understood, clear and accurate. Messages should be at a sixth grade level, in print or over the web, including graphics and color. "Shelter-in-Place" was cited as an example of a term not readily understood by the general public.
- ✓ Message materials should include information on other sources of expert advice to increase credibility.
- ✓ Messages should reflect full disclosure from government agencies.
- ✓ Government agencies should develop effective media-based dissemination plans. The public will turn to a variety of sources for information in an emergency.