

Construction safety: the final frontier?

At the dawn of the next millennium — while computing professionals fret about Y3K — historians and sociologists will likely be charting the evolution of human progress using a wide range of markers. Foremost among such markers may well be the evolution of workplace safety generally, and construction safety in particular.

Thank goodness the days are gone when railway construction could be measured in construction worker deaths per mile of track. And small children are no longer employed as chimney sweeps.

Everywhere in the world, including Ontario, on-the-job safety of construction workers is proving a tough nut to crack. Although the lost-time injury rate of Ontario's construction workers is among the lowest in Canada — 1.37 per 100 workers — the province is striving to improve worker safety through better enforcement of regulations and by enhancing awareness of safety measures, including those related to fall prevention.

Between 2005 and 2009, almost 40 per cent of Ontario workers who died in work-related incidents were construction workers — 97 of them died and 999 were seriously injured.

Since April 2007, the province's team of more than 430 safety inspectors has made nearly 285,000 visits to workplaces, of which about 200,000 were proactive (i.e., visits not in response to workplace injuries). They issued more than 470,000 compliance orders.

During a recent three-month check of more than 2,800 construction projects, our team of nearly 160 construction inspectors found many violations related to missing or inappropriate use of guardrails, scaffolding and fall-protection systems. Inspectors always stress the "hierarchy of fall protection": guardrails first, then travel restraint (e.g., tethers) and — only as a last resort — fall-arrest systems. Better to prevent a fall than to have to arrest one in progress.

A high-profile advertising campaign (sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Labour, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and the Infrastructure Health & Safety Association) is currently promoting awareness of construction safety. We are providing safety tips concerning fall prevention — in print at construction sites and on our web site — in English and French as well as Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian and Chinese, languages that are currently dominant in the construction industry.

On the construction safety page of the labour ministry's website, www.ontario.ca/ConstructionSafety, and on YouTube, viewers can watch work safety

videos, including one about residential construction and, soon, one about suspended platforms.

To help workers and the public to report worksite practices and conditions that appear unsafe, we have introduced a toll-free telephone line: 1-877-202-0008.

We continue to target repeat offenders and shut down construction projects when workers' lives are in danger. And, during inspections, we are increasing our focus on training and worker supervision.

By year-end, a panel of experts, led by former cabinet secretary and deputy minister of labour Tony Dean, will provide recommendations on a wide range of workplace safety issues.

We are also working to stem the underground economy in Ontario's construction sector by improving compliance with requirements for revenue reporting, worker training, and workplace health and safety.

The province's regulator of builders of new homes, Tarion Warranty Corporation, is helping the ministry to locate unregistered builders.

So, what's the bottom line? Are we on track to save more lives and preventing more injuries? Are we achieving an inclusive workplace culture of responsibility for safety?

Time will tell, of course. But we hope — indeed, we firmly believe — that future historians will be able to confirm that the safety of Ontario workers improved markedly in the early decades of the 21st century.

— Peter Fonseca, Ontario Minister of Labour