

Owners STAND Up for Suicide Prevention

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***Editor's Note:** This article is the second in an ongoing series addressing the construction industry's high rate of suicide. CURT and The VOICE have taken a stand to be bold and vocal in their support to promote mental health awareness, substance use disorders, suicide, and the overall wellbeing of the construction workforce. This article highlights what several CURT members are doing to address suicide prevention in their organizations. The cover story for the next issue, Issue 4 of The VOICE, will focus on how CURT owners and members can address broader mental health and wellbeing needs of their workforce.*

COVID-19 continues to unleash a fury of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty on the global economy. Before COVID-19 struck, society and the construction industry had challenges with mental health, substance use disorders, and suicide. One small silver lining is that the construction industry had a solution to these challenges in the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (CIASP; www.preventconstructionsuicide.com).

According to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), the construction workforce is deemed to be at high risk for suicide. Construction is the industry with the highest number of suicides among all occupations. Moreover, construction has the second highest rate of suicide among all occupations following only the mining and oil/gas extraction industry group. The rate in the United States for construction industry workforce is over three times the rate for the general population (45.3 per 100,000 workers vs. 14.2 per 100,000 population).

Why CURT Supports Suicide Prevention in the Construction Industry

CURT Board Member Angela Skow, a Senior Account Executive at Aon Risk Services, is a long-time industry friend. Thanks to an introduction to CURT by Skow, I had the honor of presenting at the CURT National Conference in February 2020.

Skow describes why the issue of suicide prevention is so important to the organization, saying, “As a CURT Board member, it is important that we are aware of the issues the construction industry faces every day and that these issues are brought to the forefront. We must all take positive action to communicate and educate the impact of employee wellbeing, not only from physical health but from a mental health standpoint and the impact this is having on our coworkers, friends, and family every day.”

CURT has taken a bold position on addressing mental health and suicide prevention in presentations and publications in 2020-2021. CURT is highlighting strategies and solutions for members to address these issues in their organizations.

What is the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention?

The CIASP is a non-profit formed in October 2016 to help address the issue of the high suicide rate and high number of suicide deaths in the U.S. construction industry. The CIASP was formed by the Construction Financial Management Association (CFMA). I was a catalyst for the formation for the CIASP by virtue of requesting the organization to publish an article on mental health and suicide prevention in the construction industry in June of 2015.

CFMA decided to launch the CIASP to provide leadership support and structure to the growing mental health and suicide prevention movement. In 2018, the CIASP reorganized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with governance in the form of officers and trustees. The CIASP exists to unify the construction industry around the vision of zero suicide and to share resources to help all industry stakeholders address suicide prevention in their organizations.

Why the CIASP is Necessary in the Construction Industry

Michelle Walker is the Chairman of the CIASP, and the Vice President of Finance and Administration for SSC Underground in Phoenix, Arizona. Walker says, “I heard the stories of the stigma still surrounding suicide and the fact that survivors were still hesitant to even honestly state that loved ones had died by suicide. I was taken back to high school when my dad’s best friend died by suicide.”

Walker told me how she “remembered the struggle my dad had with the fact that nobody would say what happened and the feeling that he had to “cover up” a friend’s death.” She remembers being “shocked that the same things were happening today as they did 25 years ago in the macho oil town (in Alberta, Canada) I grew up in.” Walker asserted that this awareness of stigma “combined with my personal passion for helping our workforce become the best that they can be,

personally and professionally, compelled me to get involved and help our industry take this on as a leadership imperative.”

How the CIASP Was Formed

CFMA CEO & President Stuart Binstock recalls his first reaction being one of apprehension when Kristy Domboski, Director of Editorial Services, approached him about an article about suicide prevention. Binstock says, “As an organization that represents construction financial managers, this was not a typical topic that our magazine would cover.” Binstock continues, saying, “We had no idea what the reception would be to this article and this issue within a CFMA publication and ultimately the entire construction industry.”

Binstock reminisced how CFMA took this issue on with a great deal of vigor quickly after the initial article was published in November of 2015. He recalls that, “It was not difficult to convince our leadership that this was the right thing to do since many of their companies had been adversely impacted by mental health issues. They very quickly understood that this issue would never get better if we didn’t come out and talk about it openly and try and remove the stigma related to talking about mental health in the construction industry.”

He continues, “We did this for the right reasons. We addressed suicide prevention as a human capital risk management issue. It was the right thing to do given the statistics that highlighted how large the problem was in the construction industry. We realized early on that we need to involve all the major construction industry associations to make this an industry-wide initiative.”

What Has been the Impact of the CIASP?

Walker affirms, “We have started the conversation about the need to address suicide prevention as a health and safety value for our industry.” She shares that, “We get far fewer strange looks when we talk about suicide prevention in the workplace than we did five years ago,” adding, she is excited to “have not only started the conversation but created resources to enable companies who understand the urgency of the situation to take action. Awareness without action will not move the needle. We have focused on helping industry leaders take action.”

Testimonials from CURT Members: Suicide Prevention Programs in their Organizations

United Group Services, Inc.

United Group Services, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, is an industrial mechanical construction company that specializes in piping, fabrication, scaffolding, and insulation. Kevin Sell, Core Values Officer for United Group Services and I shared the topic of suicide prevention during the CURT Virtual Safety Conference in May.

Following my presentation, Sell shared his company's commitment and journey to incorporating suicide prevention into their safety, health, and wellness program. He ended his presentation with a suicide prevention video that United Group Services produced in-house. The ending of the video reinforced the power of human connections with several company leaders and invited any employees struggling with mental health to "call me". You can watch it here:

<https://youtu.be/zpPl1Yd0qvc>.

Sell highlighted several key learnings from incorporating suicide prevention into the company's safety, health, and wellness program, including the benefit of "showing our craft professionals that it is okay and necessary to talk about mental illness and suicide." Moreover, Sell shared that the company uses, "Total Employee Health as the goal to encompass all aspects of prevention, protection, and support." Sell offers a challenge for those companies that do not have a program: "What would you do if you learned of an electrical hazard threatening your employees? Assuming the employee would act upon a suicide risk, why would the company not adopt a suicide prevention program? *The threat is the same.*"

Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) Commitment to Suicide Prevention

Greg Sizemore is the Vice President of Health, Safety, Environment and Workforce Development for Associated Builders and Contractors, an association member of CURT. Representing ABC's 21,000-plus members, Sizemore joined the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention two years ago as a trustee and was elected Vice Chairman in December 2019.

Sizemore highlighted five important ways ABC has been promoting mental health and suicide prevention into its programming and activities:

1. Invited Michelle Walker, the current chair of CIASP, to speak during ABC's 2019 Convention, which was the first-time suicide prevention was formally addressed among the ABC membership.
2. Provided information on substance abuse and mental health issues impacting the construction industry to the ABC chapter and member network.
3. Incorporated suicide prevention into ABC's overall safety messaging and outreach efforts.
4. Retooled ABC's STEP Safety Management Program to include a focus on total human health instead of just physical safety.
5. Committed internal and external resources to the alliance in order to expand the digital footprint and promote and raise awareness around suicide prevention among ABC members and the industry as a whole.

Sizemore said ABC is, “Aiming to make this part of our everyday conversations so it becomes part of our everyday actions.” Sizemore expressed the importance of “proactively breaking down the stigma around mental health and suicide in a male-dominated industry like construction.” He says, “It’s not an easy topic to discuss, but we’re actively trying to give people the language and the tools to talk about it, to address it on their own with crews, as companies and as an overall industry.” Sizemore adds, “We’re creating a new story when it comes to mental health and suicide prevention.”

Lendlease; Americas Region

Lendlease is a contractor member of CURT. The company is a global property and infrastructure group based in Sydney, Australia and the company has operations in four regions of the world: Australia, Europe, The Americas, and Asia. In 2014, Lendlease formed a Global Mental Health Peer Group to address mental health, recognizing the high rates of suicide in the construction sector.

Lendlease took steps to prioritize mental health and suicide prevention within the company and safety culture. Lendlease’s Global Minimum Requirements for safety were updated to include mental health and fatigue. In 2015, Lendlease began its partnership with MATES in Construction, a suicide prevention program for construction workers in Australia.

In the Americas region, Lendlease began its journey on mental health promotion around the same time. The company began its efforts focusing on health-related wellness programming for its employees, covering topics such as stress, sleep, fatigue, and work-life balance. Lendlease partnered with the National Council on Behavioral Health to offer Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. MHFA equips participants to be first aid responders if a mental health crisis occurs. To date, approximately 10 percent of Lendlease employees in the U.S. have received certified MHFA training.

Lendlease sought to create a culture that reduces the stigma around mental health by integrating this thinking throughout construction and safety operations, such as Toolbox Talks.

In 2018, the company piloted a suicide prevention pilot program during which Living Works provided in-person training to tradespeople and Lendlease site personnel. In 2019, Lendlease partnered with the same organization to develop a 60-minute suicide prevention training program specifically targeted to tradespeople. This workshop focuses on raising awareness, creating open conversations, and providing tools and resources for someone seeking support for themselves or others. Launched just before COVID-19, the training reached more than 100 project site workers, including trades such as flooring, sheet metal, and roofing.

Lendlease strives to create a culture of care throughout its business and is mindful about extending this impact across the entire construction industry. Recognizing that industry-wide collaboration is critical to driving change, Eleni Reed, Head of Sustainability-Americas for Lendlease, joined the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention (CIASP's) Board of Trustees.

Cal Beyer is vice president of workforce risk and worker wellbeing for CSDZ. He is a Certified Wellness Practitioner. Cal was instrumental in the launch of the Construction Industry Alliance for Suicide Prevention. He serves on the Executive Committee for the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention and the Expert Advisory Group for the Center for Workplace Mental Health. He was recognized by Engineering News-Record in April 2017 as a Top 25 Newsmaker for 2016. You can contact Beyer at cbeyer@CSDZ.com or 651-307-7883.

STAND Up Pledge Form for Owners

All members of CURT are encouraged to consider signing the Pledge to STAND up to suicide prevention in the industry. Each letter in STAND represents a step in a comprehensive suicide prevention program. Construction owners and other key stakeholders can all STAND up for suicide prevention and address it as a health and safety value by:

- **S** = Creating **SAFE** cultures.
- **T** = Providing **TRAINING** to identify and help those at risk.
- **A** = Raising **AWARENESS** about the suicide crisis in construction.
- **N** = **NORMALIZING** conversations around suicide and mental health.
- **D** = **DECREASING** the risks associated with suicide in construction.
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A special link was created by the CIASP for CURT for project owners:

https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=22&c=1.jpg

There are five additional pledge forms for the major stakeholder groups in the construction industry. To take part, visit the stakeholder group page below, that your organization represents, and complete the online pledge for your organization. It is requested that the senior leader of the organization sign the pledge form and take actions to communicate the organization's commitment to addressing suicide prevention programming in their company.

- **Contractor Pledge:** https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=20&c=1
- **Union Pledge:** https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=18&c=1
- **Association Pledge:** https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=21&c=1
- **Industry Service Provider or Supplier Pledge:**
https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=19&c=1
- **Mental Health/Suicide Prevention Organization Pledge:**
https://preventconstructionsuicide.com/form.php?form_id=17&c=1

Resources Available from the CIASP

Various resources are available from the CIASP on the dedicated website. Here is a summary of the major categories of resources that are available for all construction industry stakeholders:

1. **Articles** to help provide context and statistics.
2. **White papers:**
 - 10 Questions Leaders Must Ask – Why Suicide Prevention is a Construction Imperative.
 - 10 Steps Companies Can Take to Save Lives.
3. **Downloadable posters** – English and Spanish.
4. Sample **Toolbox Talks** on various related topics.
5. **Integration Checklist** of how to incorporate mental health and suicide prevention into safety, health and wellness programs.
6. Discounted **online suicide prevention awareness training** from Living Works (\$15 per module for a course of approximately 60 minutes in length).
7. **Anonymous screening tool** from MindWise Innovations.
8. **STAND Up Pledge Form.**
9. **Wallet Cards** that can be printed.

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