Inviting OSHA to the Safety Team
MI Windows achieves OSHA Voluntary Protection Programs star for safety

Editor’s Note: This article is based on the safety roundtable held at the American Architectural Manufacturers Association, aamanet.org, 2018 Fall Conference.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, osha.gov, is often considered to be the police of workplace safety. OSHA sets rules and regulations, performs audits, issues fines and more, all in an effort to create safer workplaces. However, two OSHA recognition programs offer an opportunity for companies to bring in the Administration as a safety coach and team member, rather than just as a rule creator and enforcer.

OSHA’s voluntary recognition programs include the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program, or SHARP, for small and medium-sized companies, and Voluntary Protection Programs, or VPP, for companies with more than 200 employees. In both SHARP and VPP, companies invite OSHA into their facilities to review current safety protocol, and to work with company managers and employees to reduce safety hazards.

SHARP recognizes employers that participated in OSHA’s On-Site Consultation Program services and operate an exemplary safety and health programs. The VPP, per OSHA, recognizes larger employers that implement effective safety and health management systems and maintain injury and illness rates below national Bureau of Labor Statistics averages for their respective industries. The programs may vary state by state; some offer their own state programs and others use the federal program.

During the recent Fall Conference for the American Architectural Manufacturers Association, aamanet.org, officials from MI Windows and Doors, miwindows.com, discussed how the company worked alongside OSHA to earn the prestigious Voluntary Protection Programs star from OSHA and the Arizona Division of Occupational Safety & Health at the company’s Prescott Valley, Arizona, manufacturing facility.

“We live in a hazardous environment. ... It is a probabilities game with near-misses,” said Mike DeSoto, MI Windows’ chief operating officer during the AAMA conference. “The end game is to save lives and prevent injuries. Right behind that goal is the good it can do for the industry.”

In VPP, OSHA teams up with company management and labor to improve safety through hazard prevention and control; worksite analysis; training; and management commitment and worker involvement. The program is a “train the trainer” model, said DeSoto, with a mission of moving plants away from high compliance and high enforcement toward a behavior-based program.

Steps to certification
Allison Mendibles, MI Windows’ regional human resources manager/safety manager, described the VPP process, which includes four primary steps:
1. Begin a partnership with OSHA.
2. Find a mentor (preferably one who is local). Work with the mentor to define what needs to be addressed prior to putting in an application.
3. Submit an application. DeSoto and Mendibles recommend that companies be thorough with the application. They also note that submitting an application or finding a mentor does not trigger an OSHA audit for the company.

4. Collaborate with OSHA as they perform a four-day audit. MI’s audit looked at documentation and included validation, interviews with 25 to 30 percent of plant team members, and proof of the plant’s ability to provide immediate remediation.

The VPP certification lasts for three years, but requires annual documentation, Mendibles said.

**Improvement and training**

Throughout the VPP process, companies are asked to look for ways to improve their training procedures and reduce hazards at their facilities. “We want our team to be safe when they come to work, so we are always looking for ways to improve their safety,” said Mendibles about MI Windows’ ongoing efforts.

Previous working condition improvements at the company include bringing in high-volume fans, placing water coolers throughout the plant and adding all LED lights inside and outside, Mendibles said. “Our back parking lot is now well lit, after second shift workers pointed out it was too dark,” said Mendibles. She said the plant is looking for a portable lifting device for workers.

In addition to facility improvements, companies in VPP also work to make training improvements. VPP addresses training processes including trauma training, crisis management and Lock Out Tag Out training.

“We go a step above basic First Aid and CPR,” said Mendibles. “Our trauma training is first-hand training geared toward our manufacturing plant, specifically. [Independence Training Inc.] looked at our hazards and made real-life scenarios of things that could happen in our plant.”

**Increasing involvement**

Working with OSHA as a member of a company’s safety team, and becoming a VPP star site has provided notable benefits, according to DeSoto and Mendibles. Specifically, it:

- Is a behavior changing activity
- Allows the management to engage leaders at all levels
- Creates a more connected workforce
- Allows written response to OSHA complaints
- Provides industry recognition
- Improves safety performance.

DeSoto encouraged more manufacturers to get involved in VPP. “We’d love for every manufacturer to be partnered with OSHA, since it helps us all,” said DeSoto.

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