

Loss Control *NOTES*

Accident Prevention: Consider Cleats

By Kerry Jarrell, Bering Straits School District Business Manager and Chair, APEI Board of Directors

“Slips, trips, and falls. Slips, trips, and falls. Slips, trips, and falls,” mumbled the risk manager for our church in rural Alaska. Because he had said little else since he got off the plane, I was hesitant to interrupt his first effort to speak. Finally, I stopped him and asked, “What about, ‘slips, trips, and falls?’”

“Well,” he responded, “without them I wouldn’t have a job.”

At that point, I understood something about risk management that had eluded me for fifteen years. I thought that risk management was about avoiding fires and not violating employee rights. To some degree, I was right. However, the man explained that the most preventable losses were those that came from slips, trips, and falls.

Over time, I forgot the lesson that the risk manager had taught me. Then, in the fall of 2005, after attending a free risk management seminar presented by APEI, I started thinking about ways that we could reduce our exposure to claims. I read an article about one small employer who was so fed up with employees filing claims over slips, trip, and falls that he stood outside on the parking lot every morning that the temperature was below freezing and watched the employees as they arrived, parked their cars, and walked into the building. What he witnessed was quite simple. When ice was on the ground, people slipped, tripped, and fell.

Our school district is like every other governmental employer in Alaska. Our employees use trucks, snow machines, four-wheelers, bikes, and skis to get to work. Most of them wear boots or shoes with good treads when the weather is bad, which is most of the time. Surely they don’t need help with their footing. However, every year we have loss of time accidents due to, guess what? Slips, trips, and falls.

We decided to do something about it. We used the example of the small business owner I had read about and decided to offer our employees something that would help them prevent falling. We called all of our fifteen

schools and asked, “If we provided shoe cleats, (you know those rubber things that old ladies pull on their shoes) would your employees wear them? Thirteen out of fifteen said, “Yes.”

After researching the brands and types on the Internet, we placed an order for 400 pairs of shoe cleats at about \$17 each. When they arrived, we announced that they would be distributed to every employee. We asked only two things. First, please wear them when the ground is slippery. Second, please take only one pair. We could not afford to equip the whole village.

The day the shoe cleats arrived, the weather was miserable. We had several inches of snow on the ground that had thawed and refrozen. The temperature had risen to 35 degrees and walking was nearly impossible. *Employees stood in line to get their shoe cleats.* One school principal wrote, “Our staff applaud the District for providing such a benefit without being coerced or required to do something to simply protect people from injury.”

“This may be the best money the District has spent in my twenty years of service,” a veteran maintenance man said.

One teacher wrote, “I feel very fortunate to work for a school system that places employee safety ahead of the budget.” In teacher negotiations this spring, the union commended the District for providing such a thoughtful benefit for teachers. Was there a cost to the District? Of course there was. The benefit? In the words of the MasterCard ad, “Priceless!!”

We recently completed the budget process for next year. The request for \$5,000 for shoe cleats for employees passed without hesitation.

Slips, trips and falls? Not on our watch.

Loss Control NOTES is published by Alaska Public Entity Insurance to provide some management guidelines for your organization’s risk management program. The information provided is advisory only.

For additional information, contact Mike Lary (mlary@akpei.com) at Alaska Public Entity Insurance.