

After getting injured at home, First Transit's Bob Allen was inspired to create more recovery-at-work opportunities for First Transit workers.

'It happened in the blink of an eye'

By Kathy Eccles

When First Transit area vice-president Bob Allen was injured cutting down a tree at home, the life-threatening incident was a wake-up call — he was more committed than ever to helping injured workers recover at work.

On Family Day last year, Bob Allen planned to cut down a dead tree for firewood. A former logger, he had cut down thousands before. He hitched a winch line from the tree to an ATV his wife was operating. He made the undercut, adding tension to the line, and started the back cut. Unexpectedly hollow, the tree exploded, spun on its stump, and came right toward him. "It happened in the blink of an eye," he recalls.

"I tried to run and tripped on some blackberry vines. I still remember the sound, like a handful of chopsticks breaking." His injuries included a flail chest — his ribs were broken in multiple places. Surgeons bolted titanium plates to his ribs and he spent eight days in the hospital.

Allen was off work for a total of six weeks, but he felt the void of being disconnected from work almost immediately.

"Within a few days, I lost touch with my workplace. I stopped getting texts or emails and was out of the loop. Within a month, I was completely disconnected."

Personal injury leads to lightbulb moment

Allen is the area vice-president of First Transit Canada, which has around 1,000 B.C. employees. First Transit provides operations, administration, and maintenance services to BC Transit, handyDART, Greyhound, and school district buses.

When Allen returned to work, regional safety manager Kim Meadows noticed that he was no longer teasing her about safety. "He used to like to say — tongue in cheek — that safety is overrated. He doesn't joke about that anymore. Now he says, 'safety is everything.'"

Ray Zukanovic, key account performance consultant at WorkSafeBC, also saw a change in Allen. The two were in Victoria last year when BC Transit and union Unifor 333 presented a new recovery-at-work program, "Stay Onboard."

BC Transit's Stay Onboard program is a union-supported initiative covering both occupational and non-occupational injuries. The program provides direct

access to physiotherapy for assessment and treatment, in order to determine medically appropriate duties for workers after an injury. All injuries are treated with the same level of support and urgency.

The presentation, which happened just months after Allen's injury, hit home. At the time, Allen told Zukanovic, "Since my injury, I know I need to do more on recovery at work because it's the right thing to do. I get the importance of a connection to work and appropriate modified duties. If I didn't have my laptop, I'd go crazy."

A better job jar

Zukanovic first became involved with First Transit about four years ago. He works in WorkSafeBC's Strategic Engagements department, which works with employers to improve health and safety and injury-management culture, recover-at-work processes, and collaboration and communication with WorkSafeBC. "We approached First Transit because the company was struggling with returning occupationally injured workers in comparison to other large employers within the same industry," he says.

"We recognized there was a huge opportunity to improve the way the company provided modified duties." Zukanovic and return-to-work specialist nurse Rachelle Grace introduced best practices and training for supervisors.

First Transit's improved injury-management program has been in place for about 18 months. The program is intertwined with the company's prevention initiatives, including an ergonomics program to tackle musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs). The company also

continues to develop the program as needed. For example, Meadows worked with their union and Zukanovic and Grace on creating a job jar, which takes into account typical physical limits with common injuries and gives options for medically appropriate modified duties for specific jobs.

Allen adds, "There's nothing demeaning, so employees are not de-motivated. They're not counting paper clips."

The results of the program can be seen in the numbers. In 2014, First Transit's WorkSafeBC claims experience rating yielded a 38.9 percent surcharge. By 2017 it was down to 3.5 percent. By 2018, only 1.1 percent. In 2019, First Transit is in a 1.4 percent discount position. "It's the first discount in the history of the company," notes Meadows.

First Transit will continue to gain knowledge from work disability-prevention audits, which bring together senior vice-presidents from First Transit Canada operations from two locations with union members, to participate in the reviews.

In the meantime, Allen is happy to share what he learned from his near-death experience. "I came away with a whole new appreciation for having to always do a risk assessment before you start a job; it changed my attitude to safety completely."

For more information

WorkSafeBC has a number of resources to help employers create or improve a return-to-work or recovery-at-work program. Visit [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com) and search for "Recovery & Work" to learn more. 📞



OKANAGAN
AUDIO Lab
OFTEN COPIED - NEVER EQUALLED

www.okaudiolab.com
Phone: 250-542-1686
Toll Free: 1-800-663-2884

Custom Hearing Protection
Respirator Fit Testing
Mobile Industrial Hearing Tests



TOTAL SAFETY TSS Total Safety Services Inc.®

- Industrial Hygiene Services
- Hazardous Materials Surveys & Management
- Asbestos Laboratory Services

Contact Info:
O: 604.292.4700
#112-4595 Canada Way
Burnaby, BC V5G 1J9

Web:
[pacificchh.totalsafety.com](https://www.pacificchh.totalsafety.com)