

On the cover

Bridgette De Groot and Ana Marie Domasig discuss infectious disease protocols and supplies as part of the peer safety program.



Peer support program builds safety culture in long-term care

By Sarah Ripplinger

In the dynamic work environment of a long-term care facility, issues need to be dealt with on the floor and in real time. For one facility in Victoria, training, peer support, and a partnership with WorkSafeBC have been key to keeping workers safe from injuries.

When faced with a workplace concern, colleagues often consult each other to resolve the situation. This kind of peer support can help workers at long-term care facilities, such as The Heights at Mt. View, manage health and safety concerns in real-time.

The Baptist Housing facility in Victoria, B.C., houses 260 seniors with complex care needs, and is staffed 24-7 from a pool of 365 front-line caregivers and support workers. While The Heights has an active joint health and safety committee, staff and management wanted to further reduce injuries, increase training, and improve orientation for nurses and care aides.

“We noticed that employees needed different kinds of support on the floor — not just with resident handling, but also with such things as infection control and orientation,” says Dyan Te, a resource nurse educator and member of The Heights’ peer safety team.

“We wanted to provide more support at orientation for new hires and continue that support for all staff on a daily basis.”

Creating a peer program

Several years ago, The Heights launched a musculoskeletal injury (MSI) coaching program. Through the program, experienced care aides and nurses coached new hires and other staff and provided real-time guidance on things such as preventing soft-tissue injuries when transferring or repositioning residents. But The Heights had two big challenges: finding enough staff members who felt comfortable being a coach and structuring the program in the most effective way.

In early 2018, The Heights worked with WorkSafeBC’s Mike Paine, a key account performance consultant, and Heather Middleton, a prevention industry specialist. When WorkSafeBC did an initial employer assessment, gap analysis, and worker survey with The Heights, the team confirmed that the MSI coaches were not being utilized by staff. A new model was piloted and the Peer Safety Team was born with the mission “to support a safety culture and reduce team member injury.”

Under the new initiative, employees now self-identify as peers, as opposed to being appointed by the employer, notes Te. Plus, peers have more autonomy in their role, which gives them a sense of ownership and pride.

“All peers are front-line workers who have the knowledge and experience to quickly address safety issues when they arise,” says site manager Walter Greaser. Peers also support injury prevention by leading monthly educational sessions on topics such as how to properly use slings or soaker pads and hand hygiene. The floor with the highest attendance at the educational sessions wins a prize, and attendance statistics are gathered to help leadership track the program’s success.

Measuring the return on investment

The peer safety team meetings have been well-attended thanks to support from management, adds Te. They’ve provided financial support by covering initial startup costs as well as staffing costs to backfill employees who attend the monthly peer team safety meetings. Management is also prepared to act on issues and innovations raised by the peer safety team. Funding is set aside to implement the policy and procedural changes recommended by the team.



Glenn Webber and Nathy Orticio post new workplace safety information on the peer safety team bulletin board.



Peer safety team members attending their December monthly meeting.

In addition to on-site training, several peers have received train-the-trainer education on resident handling from SafeCare BC, a health and safety association for continuing care. They also receive leadership and policy training through The Heights. Meanwhile, WorkSafeBC continues to be involved with the team and their injury prevention initiatives by participating in meetings and providing advice, expertise, and resources when needed.

The facility has seen a drop in employee injuries since the launch of the peer safety team, notes Greaser. “That’s a direct impact from the program.” There has also been a significant increase in staff knowledge and appreciation of the importance of occupational health and safety. “This knowledge directly transfers to the care and safety of the residents,” adds Greaser.

Skill-building and NAOSHing

In May 2019, Middleton encouraged The Heights to participate in the North American Occupational Safety and Health (NAOSH) Week for the first time. The team

held a wellness fair with the theme “people, passion, and prevention” and were rewarded by taking home the B.C. award for Best New Entry at the November 28 safety forum and awards dinner in Burnaby, B.C.

Six care workers from the joint committee and peer safety team coordinated The Heights’ wellness fair, which brought together eight external exhibitors and eleven internal departments and committees.

The Baptist Housing executive team held the annual staff appreciation BBQ the same day to generate more buzz and excitement. This opened the fair up to over 120 day- and evening-shift workers.

Attendees were treated with external personal wellness vendors, such as a seller for essential oils offering tips for relaxation at home and a local massage college giving free massages. A local police constable taught staff about personal safety and WorkSafeBC ran a “What’s Wrong with this Picture?” safety education contest. The committee also sourced donations from local organizations for door prizes and participant bags.

Displays focused on key safety issues within individual departments or committees. For example, The Heights' maintenance department focused on fire safety. Education services focused on MSI prevention and responding to a Code White — an emergency response signalled when violence occurs.

"We also included information about psychological trauma and emotional trauma," adds Te. "Employees are quite familiar with physical injury, and we wanted to let them know they can also get support for emotional trauma."

Owning health and safety

Overall, their NAOSH win and their new peer program are just the beginning of a continuing journey to reduce injuries — a journey that Middleton and Paine have been pleased to have been a part of, through WorkSafeBC's engagement with The Heights.

"In the time that I have been working with The Heights, I have seen them grow and really take ownership of their health and safety," says Middleton. "They are making the time to listen to their workers and enact changes that make a direct impact on their health and safety at the workplace." 🍷

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