

Recognizing ironworkers in need

A review of last year's work hours by area and market sector reveals a wide spectrum of differences in membership and financial gains and losses. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on local unions varied greatly, with some having no job disruption and others having job cancellations and delays. The pandemic brought on a time uncertainty for members, contractors, builders and developers.

As the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the Iron Workers worked to establish benefits for the unemployed and underemployed. We researched and advocated for support for our employers to provide the necessary guidance and personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep our members safe on the job site. The coronavirus's unknowns and newness led to provincial, state and federal governments offering practical and impractical solutions, some resulting in job-site productivity issues. In selected cases, ironworker jobs became more hazardous, navigating normal tasks while wearing the prescribed PPE while working aloft and using heavy equipment and tools. Transport, ingress and egress, change shacks, shanty access and break area protocols were modified to accommodate COVID-19 practices.



ERIC DEAN
General President

Unfortunately, I am saddened to report the death of some of our brother and sister ironworkers from the coronavirus. Our hearts go out to the families affected by this terrible disease, especially our active and retired members and their families who lost loved ones. We grieve with you.

Every year the Iron Workers restate and rededicate to the goal of the eradication of worksite injuries and fatalities from our industry. It is no different this year. In 2021, please commit to making safety your first and last thought—make the health and safety of yourself and your coworkers a priority. Protecting ourselves from COVID-19 is a new challenge, but one we are indeed capable of meeting.

When we became ironworkers, we joined what I consider the greatest trade in the construction industry, a trade of pride, skill, honor and camaraderie.

A disturbing trend surfaced in the last year across the construction industry, regrettably involving ironworkers at a higher rate—a startling increase in deaths related to suicide. These deaths exceed the number of COVID-19 and worksite fatalities. As general president, I struggle with the report of each member fatality. I question each and every action. I want to know what more can be done to protect our members. If you have ever had the misfortune of witnessing a job-site fatality, I feel your pain. As an ironworker, I witnessed the death of a tradesman from a different craft on a project. It still haunts me today, a lingering, constant memory of what-ifs. It fuels my devotion to keep ironworkers safe, to achieve zero fatalities and injuries.



As a business agent, I attempted to help members with drug and alcohol issues, even taking a brother to rehab on Christmas Eve. After taking him to rehab a second time, I was devastated after he lost his battle with addiction. It left me dumbfounded and helpless as I searched for answers of what more I could have done. Another union brother whose dues I paid to get him reinstated and back to work led to a reprimand by his father insisting I was enabling his alcoholism by getting him work and not the help he needed most. My union brother lost his addiction battle by suicide, a devastating loss that has stuck with me through all these years.

A member's job-site fatality wreaks havoc on family and coworkers. As a union representative, it is the hardest responsibility of the job. While offering comfort is foremost, determining what happened, why it happened and how to prevent it from happening again becomes our job, priority and duty. A member's death should not happen in vain. We must look after the family and job-site community to ease their loss and take the necessary steps to ensure it doesn't happen again.

In reflection, sole responsibility should never fall upon a single business agent; as a union, we have a shared obligation to look out for each other. Our constitution states, "An injury to one is the concern of all." As general president, I ask every member, from the first-year apprentice to the seasoned journeyman, to unite and recognize the importance of the health and welfare of all brothers and sisters in our craft.

We've learned the most challenging health and safety obstacle to assess is our members' mental health. With so many factors to gauge, the list of contributing factors can be lengthy—substance abuse, economic worries, relationships, sexual identity, past or present physical and mental abuse, depression, mental and physical illness and loneliness, are just a few examples. Our industry is crippled with opioid addiction as members grapple with recovery. We must overcome the stigma of disease and addiction.

Employee assistance programs are there to help. If you need or know of a brother or sister in need, please get it. Mental health is just as important as job-site safety. Times dictate we expand our roles as our brothers' and sisters' keepers to be aware and take action.

The North American Building Trades Union and the Iron Workers are looking at ways to decrease the alarming opioid dependency issue. Our union, through local health and welfare programs and IMPACT, provides employee assistance programs (EAPs). If you have never had use for one, consider yourself lucky. Not everyone is. Please take time to learn what resources are available in your local.

When we became ironworkers, we joined what I consider the greatest trade in the construction industry, a trade of pride, skill, honor and camaraderie. Every ironworker, from those on the shop floor to those on the tallest building, should practice care. Care for themselves and care for fellow ironworkers, on and off the job.

While I will never be satisfied with any number but zero for worksite fatalities, and will continue toward that goal, the growing concern of suicides in our industry needs to be addressed now. Take the time to learn more about recognizing ironworkers in need (see p. 21 for a crisis strategy plan for ironworkers) and help someone. While the Iron Workers have developed courses for supervisors to address these issues, it must be our boots on the ground to help reverse these disturbing trends and attend to members who are struggling. We can all take action.

Make a note of the Iron Workers' Lifeline phone number of 1(800) 273-8255 to get help, learn and get involved.

Call the Lifeline Anytime, 24/7

 1(800) 273-8255



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