HEIGHTENED AWARENESS

HOW TO KEEP PEOPLE SAFE POST-COVID

Operators and consultants weigh in on training issues, automation, routes, overseeing temps/contractors and more

By Jack Morgan

The recent onslaught of COVID-19 has moved laundry operators and safety specialists—both in-house and outside advisers—to rethink their approaches to safety issues in order to expand efforts to protect staff from incidents that can hurt individual employees as well as staff morale and productivity.

COVID & SAFETY POLICIES

"I think it just broadened the scope," says Michelle McNeil, Healthcare Linen Services Group (HLSG), speaking of the impact of the pandemic. "Getting to the core is what's important in order to manage the risks." McNeil, director of safety for the St. Charles, IL-based HLSG, added that the evolving state of official guidance at the start of the pandemic complicated efforts to respond. "At first, information was so conflicting for COVID that it was hard to manage. So solid facts are important." Speaking of linen, uniform and facility services companies, she says customized solutions often are required to deal with a range of safety-related challenges. "Our industry is different and will continue to be for these situations. I don't think it is a one-size-fits-all solution."

Today, even amid waning pandemic concerns, COVID-19 continues to impact operations in ways that few anticipated early on in the crisis. "COVID-19 has substantially changed the way that companies need to look at risk management/safety," says Don Bock, principal, Seabright Safety Solutions, Santa Maria, CA. He notes that the pandemic has affected personnel processes and that not all companies have adjusted adequately to this shift. "Absenteeism as a result of COVID has driven most of the companies to utilize temporary employees on a regular basis," he says, adding that laundry operators must train these temporary staff members before placing them on the production floor. "The training must include safety training," he says. "I believe companies believe that this responsibility falls to the temp agency. The temp agency is to provide safety training, but this training will not address the situations or conditions that the temporary employee will face on the job. This attitude presents a much greater risk of injury resulting from individual actions."

Brian Varner, a risk-management consultant and a recent instructor at TRSA's Professional Management Institute (PMI), says companies often assume that safety training and the responsibility for temporary staff rests with the agency that provides them. That's partially true, but laundry operators are still responsible for safety issues within their purview. "A laundry facility may

still be liable if there is an accident at the location involving someone other than an employee," says Varner of Safety Solutions for Healthcare, Denver. "Even though contractors and temp employees fall under their companies' workers' compensation program, even if it is discovered that the accident was a result of a facility worker not following procedure and as a result the contractor or temp employee is injured, the facility would need to record this as a general liability. It is critical that safety programs and procedures are in place for *all* personnel on-site. It's also important that the contractors and temp employees understand that they must follow the same safety protocols as the facility employees follow." Michael Halter, director of loss control for Haylor, Freyer & Coon Inc. Syracuse, NY, adds that all contractors should have a formal contract that, among other provisions, requires full compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) rules. Second, contractors should have an acceptable experience modification rating (EMR) for workers' compensation (under 1.0). Third, laundry operators should scrutinize contract language to ensure that contractors will adhere to risk-transfer policies and other terms, he says.

Cintas Corp., Mason, OH, is a laundry operator that embraces the kind of safety training called for above by both regular employees as well as temp workers and contractors. All staff or temps must demonstrate a clear knowledge of safety protocols before they begin work. "Nobody just walks in from off-site and says, 'I'm here to install the such and such,'" says Stephen Jenkins, director of safety & health for Cintas. "They have to go through channels before they start."

While Cintas has detailed protocols for training employees—as well as temporary staff and contractors—that served it well during the pandemic, the message that COVID-19 drove home to Jenkins was the need to heighten safety awareness beyond the workplace. He notes that no matter how strict Cintas' infection-control rules were for its plant operations, employees could more easily pick up the virus outside of work. That's affected Jenkins' outlook on the company's safety program. "We're taking a more holistic approach," he says, noting that the pandemic helped foster an enhanced emphasis on health issues generally. "It's really put the 'H' back in 'H and S' (Health and Safety)," he says. "We still are slanted toward safety in our industry. But (COVID) has caused health to play a larger role." When asked how this has affected policies toward employees, Jenkins says there are limits to what they can do outside the workplace. "That's where the division happens," he says. "You can't mandate anything outside of work. You've seen battles at all levels of government over vaccines and other COVID mandates." Education and internal information-sharing can help address outside risks—coupled with strict policies for in-house operations. Both are important to keep partners healthy and available for work. As technology has spurred automation of various plant and route processes, Cintas and other companies have had to adjust their risk-management approaches accordingly, he says.

AUTOMATION & EXCESSIVE HEAT

Jenkins likens the evolution of commercial laundering from manual operations to today's advanced automation to the shift from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles. The types of risks—and the required training to protect employees—differ dramatically, he says. "It changes the issue," he says. "Automation will reduce hazards like lacerations, 'struck by,' incidents, those types of things." However, with automation, there's a higher risk of serious or fatal incidents, and companies must build in safeguards and train staff to manage these hazards. For example, if there's an automated shuttle in the wash aisle, managers must program it to stop automatically if a person enters the area while it's moving. Companies need to train staff to stay clear of moving machinery at all times. McNeil adds that laundry operators need additional back-up plans as the use of automated systems expands. "Automation is great until it stops working," she says. "This can create hazards as 'workarounds' begin. It will be critical to have a contingency plan for those instances that technology may temporarily be interrupted."

Meanwhile, in addition to commonly cited violations such as lockout/tagout and bloodborne pathogen (BBP) rules, a recently proposed OSHA regulation on controlling indoor heat hazards has presented a new citation risk that laundries need to address. Several of the safety experts we contacted said that companies—especially those in hot climates—must ensure compliance with the new standard. "Assuming that OSHA adopts the California standard that is triggered by an outdoor temperature of 80 degrees, the employers in any state where temperatures regularly exceed 80 degrees should be very aggressive in addressing the issue," says Bock. "Heat illness is considered a serious matter. Therefore, the potential for citations and violations will be very expensive to operators." For hot, dry areas such as Arizona, "swamp coolers" that add moisture to cool the air are an effective response. Other locales may require different tactics, he says. "In humid areas, swamp coolers only make the environment warmer and more humid," he says. "Portable air conditioners can be used to cool the indoor environment." A variety of other measures may help. "Operators should evaluate the temperature indoors by establishing procedures that make it the most comfortable," Bock says. "This might mean closing all doors in the summer to better control indoor temperatures." Whatever tactics companies pursue, Halter says they should devise a heat-illness-prevention plan that takes effect any time temperatures reach a heat index of 80° or higher. It should include regular breaks for staff in cool areas, plus plenty of access to fluids to keep employees hydrated.

McNeil says companies and suppliers need to focus on tackling the issue of excessive heat in laundries. "I think the industry does need to be involved as this is a collective issue," she says. "I believe this is also good opportunity for equipment manufacturers to be involved, since their equipment can be extra sources of heat." Part of the challenge stems from finessing ambiguous advisories from regulators, she says. "There is a confusing message for the soil side of the industry," she says. "Because of BBP (bloodborne pathogen rules) drinks cannot be in soil. But keeping hydrated is an important factor in eliminating heat-related illness. We need to find a way to reconcile these conflicting requirements."

Cintas has long focused on this issue and others through its involvement in OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program (VPP). The company is the leading participant in this national initiative for all types of industries with 127 plants certified to OSHA's most rigorous safety standard. The agency has backed Cintas' focus on controlling heat stress wherever possible and making sure staff stay hydrated in hot weather. "It's been looked at under VPP, and they have lauded our hydration and heat-stress program," Jenkins says. "Our locations have always done a nice job over certain temperatures of staying in touch and discussing hydration with our team." However, he adds that, "We are never going to rest on our laurels," he says. "We're always looking for ways to improve." For route staff, that means taking advantage of access to air-conditioned customer locations to keep cool. Staff in plants can take breaks in air-conditioned areas too and should focus on drinking plenty of fluids, he says. Another issue is acclimatization, particularly for employees returning from vacations or leave time. "For OSHA compliance, acclimatization is a big deal," he says. "When you've been off for more than three days, we have to consider your acclimatization." Acclimatization means gradually building up hours on the plant floor before returning to a regular shift. Additional monitoring may also be required for these employees, he says.

Companies must apply similar oversight to employees who—even amid the recent growth of automation—are at risk for ergonomic injuries because their jobs require manual tasks. These include feeding flatwork, hangering garments, sorting soil and similar positions. The need to focus on reducing stress on joints and muscles applies to route service reps (RSRs) as well because they typically are moving clean goods into customer locations and removing soiled textiles for processing at the laundry.

CROSS TRAINING & MANAGED LIFTING

For plant staff, the issue of avoiding costly back, shoulder and similar injuries is necessary because they're performing jobs that require repetitive movement, such as feeding napkins into an ironer. Cross-training these staff to work multiple jobs can help reduce injury risks by using different sets of muscles and joints. At the same time, cross-training can enhance their skills in ways that boost morale and employee engagement. "Cross training is always a good idea," McNeil says. "Job rotation can be one way to mitigate ergonomic hazards." Varner adds that cross-training also aids productivity and longevity. "Facilities that cross-train will also benefit from lower turnover, as employees are more satisfied working multiple roles vs. a single role in plant." (see related story, pg. 14)

Halter notes how industry leaders have adjusted workspaces for individual staff members as well to reduce the potential for employee strain injuries, while making them more comfortable on the job. "Companies can make simple ergonomic improvements to limit reaching, bending and twisting (e.g., proper table heights, reducing the depth of tables and using carts with spring bottoms to reduce employee bending and stretching to reach textiles)," he says. "A major industry employer implemented these changes company-wide years ago with much success."

For RSRs, managing ergonomic risks poses different challenges. Their issue is how they lift and move goods onto or off of trucks. To protect these employees, Jenkins says management teams need to analyze the loads that the RSRs are moving, "For us at Cintas, lifting, pushing and pulling are definitely issues, but there are opportunities," he says. "In our industry, the weight of objects is not the most frequent problem. We have a lot of ability to control the weight." To do that, Jenkins suggests breaking up loads so that there's less strain on employees' backs, shoulders and arms. Bock adds that using basic tools, such as hand trucks, can enhance not only safety but productivity as well. "I've worked with many employee teams who've looked at this risk and provided solutions that not only reduce the risk, but can actually make the process more efficient," he says. "The use of a hand truck on the route allows the employee to carry more product at one time as well as relieving the employee from serving as the hand truck." Educating staff on proper lifting techniques also can help, he says. "Employees should be trained to carry goods in the power zone (waist to breast), rather than on shoulders if a hand truck is not used."

Keeping carts in good working order is another must for reducing injuries among RSRs and plant staff, according to several of the experts we contacted. McNeil says laundries and cart manufacturers should collaborate on improving carts. "I'm not sure carts were ever designed with the end users in mind," she says. "I see an opportunity to make changes in cart designs."

FOCUS ON REDUCING HAZARDS

Broadly speaking, improving employee health and safety through an enhanced risk-management program can help companies in various ways. "In addition to improving productivity, morale and retention, enhancing safety can pay direct dividends in the form of lower insurance rates as determined by a company's EMR," says Varner. The EMR focuses on the severity and frequency of workers' compensation claims over a three-year period. The goal is to maintain an EMR under a 1.0, which can result in a discounted insurance premium and directly impact the bottom line. A lower EMR will allow more negotiation leverage with insurance companies, as they will be more inclined to do business with a company that has a robust safety program, he added.

While effective safety policies—coupled with training and employee outreach—are critical to reducing EMR rates and preventing incidents, technology plays a role as well. On the route, many companies operate GPS systems that can track speeding, hard braking, leaving assigned routes and more. Jenkins notes that safety technology for commercial fleets, such as wider-angle backup cameras and warnings for distracted drivers, often lags behind that of passenger vehicles. "Many of those safety features that you have in your passenger vehicle are not readily available in trucks in our industry," he says.

For now, whether the focus is on route or plant operations—including measures to deal with excessive heat—ergonomics, or oversight of temp employees and contractors, success in incident prevention often hinges a company's willingness to work with staff and "walk the talk" in terms of reviewing and updating hazard-mitigation efforts on an ongoing basis. "The foundation to a successful safety program starts with a safety orientation and awareness program," Varner says, noting that he visits plenty of laundries with disjointed safety programs that rely—even after the pandemic—on generic training and awareness materials that don't address industry-specific safety hazards. The experts cited above will tell you that approach won't cut it if you're serious about risk management. TS

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