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**LOCAL**

## Construction firm pushes OSHA to train workers on mental health and suicide prevention



*FILE – Imitation tombstones designating some of the more than 1,000 people who took their lives by suicide in Washington state in 2017 are displayed as part of a suicide awareness and prevention program at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash., on March 12, 2019. The yellow vests on some of the markers are to indicate the victim was from the construction industry, drawstring backpacks serve to indicate youth deaths under the age of 19, and yellow ribbons indicate victims who were military veterans.*

*Ted S. Warren / AP*

By **Marilyn Schairer**

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country, wants to make mental health and suicide prevention training mandatory for workers.

The construction industry has the second highest rates of suicide deaths in the nation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Industry leaders say the COVID-19 pandemic and economy have added even more pressures on workers and resulted in higher rates of substance abuse, adding urgency for the industry to address mental health.

Suffolk CEO John Fish, along with retired Brig. Gen. Jack Hammond, who is the executive director of the veterans' wellness nonprofit **Home Base** in Charlestown, **sent a joint letter** Tuesday to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, asking that suicide awareness and prevention be made a core training requirement for all workers.

"Our collective goal as an industry should be for every worker to return home to their families each day," they wrote in the letter. "It is our job as industry leaders to train, support and educate our workers on the symptoms of mental illness and identifying suicide risk factors, which should be taken as seriously as any jobsite risk. The time is now to rally our entire industry to address this dire issue."

According to the most recent job-specific suicide data from the CDC, **45 out of every 100,000 male construction workers die by suicide**, compared to a **national average of 14**. That means that a man working in construction is 3.5 times more likely to take his own life than the general public. Female construction workers also die by suicide at a higher than average rate, with nine out of 100,000 female construction workers dying compared to the national average of eight. Only the mining, quarrying and gas and oil extraction industry has a higher rate of suicide.

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Stroud held a panel discussion Tuesday at Suffolk's auditorium to address mental health awareness. All employees within Suffolk field operations, and internal and external resource groups and functions that support construction operations were invited to attend. The purpose of the event, Stroud said, was to focus on regional needs on construction site awareness, safety awareness, and raising the level of the culture and engagement on construction sites.



*Suffolk COO Tim Stroud hosts a panel discussion on mental health and suicide prevention training. Left to right: Dr. Joe Grasso, senior director of Lyra Health; Dr. Louis Chow senior director of Home Base; Laura Lakin, assistant project manager for Suffolk; and Stroud.*

*Courtesy of Suffolk*

Stroud said the goal is to shed light on the issue during **Safety Week**, an annual weeklong event when larger construction firms across the country focus on safety programming at work sites, mental health issues, and factors that impair a worker's judgment.

"We know that in this industry there are folks that show up for work in any given day that are not in the right mental state to be able to perform their duties safely and efficiently."

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health issues, and construction industry insiders noted that also led to an increase in substance abuse with alcohol and drugs.

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members, rank and file members, aware of the signs to look for, and that some of that incorporates suicide prevention.”

Frank Callahan, CEO and president of the **Massachusetts Building Trades Unions**, represents 75,000 men and women in the building trades who work across the construction industry. The MBTU has taken in more than 1,100 veterans into apprenticeship and enrolled them in their **Helmets to Hardhats** jobs training program. Callahan said some veterans continue to struggle with issues related to their service, but that the MBTU provides great benefits including pension and health insurance plans.

Callahan noted that during difficult economic times, people get depressed and incidents of suicide go up. He added that construction is a male-dominated industry, and men don't often seek out help. He said his organization is taking steps to address the problem.

“Whether it's mental health, whether it's substance abuse or suicide, we're working on the stigma to destigmatize both. And once you get by the stigma that there are resources available,” Callahan said. “You shouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed to come forward, and through the strength of our health insurance programs, there are resources available to you.”

According to a Suffolk spokesperson, OSHA's Douglas Parker responded to Fish and Hammond's letter and said he appreciated the efforts, and that OSHA would keep pressing the issue.

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Marilyn Schairer is a reporter and producer for GBH News.

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