AGC National Safety Meeting Highlights Leading Issues

Lessons Shared at National Level Directly Impact Direction of Safety & Health Council at State Level as Well

By Kate Smiley

What’s up with job-site safety? Plenty, and there are lots of lessons to be shared at a national level as it was clear from a recent meeting of the AGC National Safety and Health Council in Cincinnati, Ohio last month.

The national meeting agenda was packed with compelling speakers and break-out sessions, and each day’s activity consistently reinforced the fact that a strong workplace safety culture is an absolutely essential element of good business practices. This semi annual event was attended by 140 safety professionals from our member companies and leaders in the industry from across the U.S., each eagerly learning, participating, and sharing technical skills and best practices. The knowledge and the lessons shared at the national level clearly benefit our 125-member strong Safety and Health Council of AGC of California, as well.

In Cincinnati, remarks from OSHA representatives Jordan Barab, the Deputy Assistant Secretary, and Bill Parsons, Director, Office of Construction Standards and Guidance, reinforced the message and the tone so consistently delivered from Washington D.C. – that well known clarion call from Secretary Solis that “there’s a new sheriff in town.” It is clear the OSHA strategy is to return to the original intent of the OSH Act, and the central focus is now on setting and enforcing workplace standards.

To be sure, we all need to have this in context: it is a shocking statistic that 14 Americans die every day on the job. About one in five is in construction. Everyone agrees that nobody should die while trying to earn a living.

It is clear the Agency is currently taking vigorous, broad based steps aimed at leveraging resources towards enforcement. What does this mean in every day terms to the California business community? Federal audits and active involvement in state agency plans. Ensuring the state agency plan in California is at least as effective as the federal program. National emphasis programs will be mandated at state levels. Pilot programs will utilize city building inspectors to report unsafe conditions on construction sites, and there will be special emphasis on “hard to reach” workers, workers rights and training in a language the employees can understand.

In short, the federal message is on strong enforcement, stiffer penalties, and less emphasis on cooperative programs. These administrative changes are designed to provide a disincentive to
employers who accept worker injuries ‘as unavoidable and as part of the cost of doing business,’ and they affect the regulatory climate in California.

OSHA has asked for our voice, and we actively and regularly participate. The National Safety Council is a great example of where and how. We take a holistic approach – participating in stakeholder and rulemaking meetings at both the federal and state levels, promoting prevention through process safety management programs, having robust education and training programs and continuing recognition and support of the cooperative programs such as SHARP and VPP. We speak up when there is legislation that needs comment. Both the national and the California Safety and Health Councils have a heavy focus on the collective work of the standards updates and initiatives.

Rules and regulations are ever changing, and the culture in which enforcement and appeals takes place is contentious. AGC’s Safety and Health Council is mandated to provide technical information and share best practices with the membership. We have also developed a “Culture of Safety beyond Compliance” program that is supplemented with symposiums and alternate education opportunities.

We have several concepts under development for the coming months and for 2011. The regulatory and legal climate dictates that we simply must have a point/counter point discussion, representing both enforcement and defense. Next, we are working on a crane safety symposium. Knowing that many people rely on the crane operator to know how to operate safely, and the rules that apply, it’s time to take the conversation further. The update to the 40-year-old Cranes and Derricks Standards is finally out, and for some, there is confusion on how this will affect the California crane regulation. We’ll get a conversation going around that topic besides going beyond the basics of crane safety. We’ll include representatives from crane manufacturers, insurance companies and industry experts. And finally, AGC of California’s Safety & Health Council will continue to concentrate on health in 2011 – silica, hearing, and yes, ergonomics. The plans are to make 2011 a year of education, with great guest speakers and increasing strong agency partnerships.

Please feel free to contact my office regarding any of the new OSHA regulations, or with any suggestions or questions on any other matters pertaining to safety. I can be reached at smileyk@agc-ca.org, or at (916) 371-2422.