

WorkSafeNB: Talk safety with young workers

GERARD ADAMS COMMENTARY

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Gerard Adams, CEO of WorkSafeNB, is urging all employers and employees to make safety a priority this summer, especially for students who are working seasonally. Photo/WorkSafeNB

It's summer and thousands of young New Brunswickers are starting new jobs.

For many, it is an important milestone. It's their first introduction to the world of work, teaching them valuable lessons about life, labour and the value of a dollar. More importantly, let's hope these jobs teach them the importance of workplace safety.

Last year, 1,080 New Brunswickers between the ages of 15 to 24 were hurt on the job. Between 2000 and 2014, 13 young workers in New Brunswick died as a result of a workplace injury. Every one of those deaths represents a life cut short, a potential never realized and families changed forever.

Our goal at WorkSafeNB is to see all workplace hazards eliminated. We envision a future with no workplace injuries, illnesses or deaths. These are all preventable and we must view them as preventable.

Young and new workers are particularly vulnerable to workplace injuries. Their energy, enthusiasm and need for

increased challenges and responsibilities can prompt them to take on job tasks they are not prepared to do safely. Lacking experience or confidence, they are often reluctant to ask questions of their employer or speak up when they encounter a dangerous situation. What's more, young New Brunswickers often work seasonally and temporarily, often in high-risk industries.

To illustrate, a recent Canadian study found young, manual labourers are more vulnerable to heat stress. The study, by the Institute for Work and Health, found the more inexperienced they are on the job, the more likely they are to need time off work to recover from heat stroke, sun stroke, fainting and other forms of heat illness.

But heat stress is just one risk. There are many such risks, and young people have the right to know about all their workplace hazards. They also have the right to take part in solving health and safety problems and ask their employer for safety training before starting the job. And they certainly have the right to refuse unsafe work.

They may not know they have these rights. But they do, just like all New Brunswick workers. That is the law. Worker safety comes first.

Employers and supervisors, take extra care of your new charges. Be approachable and willing to answer questions. Asking a question can save someone from an injury or death. Remember that all new workers require an orientation and job-specific training before they begin work at the workplace.

Moms and Dads, you also have a role in keeping your children safe at work.

If your son or daughter is starting a summer job, talk to them about workplace safety. Don't assume they have all the information they need to stay safe. Make sure they understand every job has risks and they have both rights and responsibilities to take care of their own safety. Find out how safe the work is and how carefully they are supervised. Make sure their employer has given them an orientation and job-specific training before they begin work.

Most New Brunswick employers do take their safety responsibilities seriously and, overall, we are proud New Brunswick remains one of the safest places to work in Canada. While the province's accident frequency rate has decreased by 10 per cent since 2010, we still have work to do. One injury, one death, one occupational disease is one too many.

But reducing workplace injuries is going to require more than just compliance with New Brunswick laws. WorkSafeNB works tirelessly with employers and workers to create a culture of workplace safety in New Brunswick, a philosophy that permeates daily activities and continues to grow and be nurtured.

Supporting new and young workers is an important key in fostering a long-term safety culture. That is where New Brunswick parents come in. We need your support. By helping your children embrace safety in all aspect of their lives, and especially as they enter the workforce, you can help them stay safe.

Get the conversation started by visiting www.youthsafenb.ca. It has many resources for young workers, parents and employers.

So tonight, parents, when you are driving your child to soccer practice or sitting down at the dinner table, I encourage you to talk to them about safety at their summer job. Ask them questions. Inform them of their rights. Help them think about safety at every opportunity.

Don't let a close brush with death or a near-miss injury be their teacher. Your talk with them tonight may change your lives.

Gerard Adams is president and CEO of WorkSafeNB

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