

Case Study: How West Georgia Health Systems Transformed Their Safety Procedures

Client Plant: West Georgia Health System (WGHS) in LaGrange, Ga. is one of the largest employers in its south west Georgia community. The health system, which includes a 276 bed hospital, a hospice, two nursing homes and a dialysis clinic, employs nearly 1,400 people and has a 75-year history of serving residents in nine surrounding Georgia counties and two eastern Alabama counties. While the health system consistently ranked in the top 25 percent of Georgia hospitals for its performance in clinical areas, it was only average compared to other hospitals for on-the-job injuries sustained by its own workforce.

Performance-Improvement Opportunity: “Nurses were getting stuck with needles. Clinicians were getting injured taking care of patients,” said Julie Rayburn (Now works at EHS Mobis in Alabama), Employee Safety Coordinator for the West Georgia Health System. “Nurses were lifting patients by themselves and incorrectly so back strains were a big problem. We saw a lot of room for improvement.”

Rayburn added that when employees did get injured, there was no one to conduct accident investigations or discover the root cause of the problem. This was an issue that needed to be addressed not just for the employees’ safety and welfare – but for the patients’.

Working with Performance Solutions Practitioners: West Georgia Health System didn’t have to look far when it began to search for a company that could help it reduce its rate of recordable safety incidents. Milliken & Company had several textile manufacturing plants in west Georgia near the hospital system, and its reputation for safety was well known within in the community and throughout the United States.

In discussions with Milliken associates, Rayburn discovered that the textile manufacturer’s vaunted safety record wasn’t due to a management-driven program but was instead driven by the employees themselves, a bottom-up approach.

One of the first things that the West Georgia Health System learned when it began working with Milliken was that it didn’t have a proper reporting system for injuries. Through the process of total consequence measurement, one of the key metrics within the Milliken Safety Process, a company can measure the cause, control, and behavior actions of its people.

Such tracking establishes “upstream” measurements (those that measure the percentage compliance with a company’s own rules, for example), rather than less-valuable

“downstream” consequence measurements. The downstream measurements were the only ones being tracked by the West Georgia Health System.

In addition to new tracking methods, the West Georgia Health system implemented new employee-led safety teams. After several meetings with the Performance Solutions by Milliken practitioners, health system employees regrouped operations and reorganized their safety approach. Instead of having a single safety team for the entire operation they would establish many teams—some for the hospital, others for the nursing homes, and still another for the hospice.

The West Georgia Health System also established accident review meetings with every employee that reported an injury.

“After an accident, we would interview the employee who had the accident and conduct an accident investigation in front of their peers,” said Rayburn. “Nobody wants to come to a meeting in front of their peers and talk about it, but it did help us to determine what happened during the accident and what improvements we needed to make.”

Such a systemic safety process knows no boundaries, and can be applied to everything from a manufacturing plant to city government.

Powerful Improvements: West Georgia Health System began to immediately see results once it began to implement the Milliken Safety Process within its employee health and safety operations. The first change that was noted was in the timeliness of the reporting of accidents.

“Instead of two, three, or four weeks, I started seeing them coming in within two, three or four days,” said Rayburn. “Now people usually fill out a report within a day or two.”

Overall, the health care organization’s recordable incident rate is now less than half that of all hospitals in the U.S. It is even lower than the incident rate for regular industry, which traditionally has many fewer recordable cases than does health care. The average recordable incidence rate for regular industry is 5.6 incidents per 200,000 man hours, and 8.8 for hospitals.

Ultimately, everything that the West Georgia Health System has done to secure the safety of its employees translates directly into improved care for its patients.