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JOB

HOUES

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MARKETPLACE

SHOP

HOME

LOCAL NEWS

SPORTS

ISLAND LIFE

ENTERTAINMENT

BUSINESS

TECHNOLOGY

OPINION

HELP PAGE

TC

Project

Data Er
Produc
Shippin

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- National Business
- Coming Events
- Trade Winds
- Local Resources

Posted on: Monday, April 19, 2004

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Construction firms build ethos of safety

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- Featured News
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 - Photo Gallery
 - Special Projects
 - Columnists

- Customer Service
- Help Page
 - Contact Us
 - E-mail News Alerts
 - Subscriber Services
 - Reader Services
 - Advertising Services
 - Make Us Your Start Page

KANE'OHE — Rain had spattered the job site before the sun came up and safety administrator Alex Harris wanted the 70 construction workers to keep an eye out for winds that could cause accidents or injuries.

"Today may be a day when we have to take a little caution," Harris told the group Friday, before every one of them went through a series of 11 stretches before diving into building a bachelor's enlisted quarters for Marine Corps Base Hawaii.



The 15-minute morning briefing included such safety reminders as "make sure everything is forklift friendly" and "let's have a safe day."

The daily stretches and safety updates are just one part of Dick Pacific Construction Co. Ltd.'s workplace safety program that has made the company Hawai'i's first construction firm to win the Hawai'i Occupational Safety and Health Division's Voluntary Protection Program award. The award will be announced Thursday by Gov. Linda Lingle.

Construction workers with Dick Pacific Construction Co. Ltd. begin the day at Kane'ohe Marine base's bachelor enlisted quarters and other work sites with a series of 11 stretches, as part of Dick Pacific's effort to prevent injuries.

Jeff Widener • The Honolulu Advertiser

Along with two other Voluntary Protection Program awards to Frito-Lay of Hawaii and Chevron Hawaii, the safety and health division also will award Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program awards to five

Hawai'i small businesses, four of which are construction companies.

It's just a coincidence that five of the eight winners work in construction, said Allan Yokoyama, business safety facilitator for the safety and health division.

But the safety awards come at a critical time for the construction industry, as laid-off crews return to work after an eight-week concrete strike beginning in February shut down job sites across O'ahu.

Hana Po'okela winners

Winners of the Voluntary Program Protection or "Hana Po'okela" awards, meaning "excellent work":

- Dick Pacific Construction Co. Ltd.
- Frito-Lay of Hawaii
- Chevron Hawaii

Construction and insurance officials were worried even before the strike began that Hawai'i's upcoming construction boom would lead to more injuries and workers' compensation claims. Now they're even more concerned because workers had been idled, or "on the bench," as they say in the industry.

Winners of the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program for smaller businesses:

- KD Construction Inc.
- Nordic Construction Ltd.
- RCI Construction Group, Pacific
- Jayar Construction
- Kimi Hotels Inc. dba Maui Seaside Hotel

"Everybody's worried about that," said Tracy Lawson, vice president of corporation safety operations for Dick Pacific.

Lawson was in charge of submitting the company's 3-inch thick application for the Voluntary Protection Program award that took two months to complete.

Just getting the application together means undergoing inspections from the safety and health division, interviews with employees and union officials, reviews of company safety records and "volumes and volumes of paperwork," Yokoyama said.

There are no cash prizes or business incentives associated with the Hawai'i Voluntary Protection Program awards, which are modeled after the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration's program, Yokoyama said.

But Yokoyama believes the awards carry prestige for companies that work at workplace safety. They're particularly noteworthy, Yokoyama said, for construction companies that move from location to location and have a harder time controlling their workplaces.

"What's significant is the fact that construction companies such as Dick

Pacific are looking at the value that safety adds," Yokoyama said. "They're actually saving lives. Their most valuable resources are being protected."

The awards for small businesses do come with benefits: Winners are exempt from state safety inspections for a minimum of one year and are eligible for at least a 5 percent discount on workers' compensation coverage, Yokoyama said.

Larger winners, such as Dick Pacific, are self-insured. And they hardly have to worry about inspections, Yokoyama said.

"There should not be a reason to even visit them," Yokoyama said. "They're the pinnacle."

If they indeed are the pinnacle of workplace safety, as Yokoyama believes, it's from making a big commitment, Lawson said.

Where some companies may have one person focused on workplace safety, Dick Pacific has a safety staff of 15.

The company was awarded for its work at the Kane'ohe Marine Corps base, where safety signs are posted near the job site trailer.

The job site involves 70 workers from 11 different subcontractors and seven different construction unions. The outside workers come and go, but are included in the daily briefings. The first time they set foot on the job site, each worker gets a one-hour safety lecture by Harris.

Beyond the morning stretching and safety briefing, each week begins with a discussion of a specific workplace safety topic that came up from the week before.

And to make sure they understand what they've been told, the workers then have to pass a quiz before the real work begins.

The company's attention to safety appears to have paid off. For the Kane'ohe site, Dick Pacific is more than 50 percent below the national average for recordable accidents that require medical care. It is also 100 percent below the national and state average for lost time accidents, Lawson said, "because we have not had any."

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▲ Top

MINI SITE MAP

LOCAL NEWS :

Education | Obituaries | Weather | Traffic Hotspots | Town Hall | Military News | Discussion Boards | Columnists

SPORTS: Surf Report | UH Sports | High School Sports | Recreation | Sports Calendar | On the Air | Golf Report Sports

ISLAND LIFE: About Men/Women | Taste/Recipes | Faith Calendar | Health/Fitness | Comics | TGIF Calendar | Tul

ENTERTAINMENT: TGIF Calendar | 4-Week Guide | Movie Showtimes | Dining | Visitors | National Arts & Leisure

BUSINESS: Hawai'i Stocks | Hawai'i Mutual Funds | Hawai'i Mortgage Rates | Island Bank Rates | Stock Quotes | / Coming Events | Trade Winds | Local Resources

TECHNOLOGY: Click! | New Products | Help & Advice | Byte Marks | National Tech News

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