

what's working

providing PPE
for mental health



Kevin Hendrickson
Business Manager,
Pipe Fitters Local Union 533,
Kansas City, Missouri



Patrick O'Hara
Vice President,
Instructor,
Pipe Fitters Local Union 533,
Kansas City, Missouri



Curtis Ohlde
Instructor/Trainer/
Safety Specialist,
Pipe Fitters Local Union 533,
Kansas City, Missouri

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

As tradespeople in the construction industry, members of Pipe Fitters Local Union 533 in Kansas City, Missouri hear a lot about the importance of safety and personal protective equipment (PPE) to help them avoid injuries on the jobsite.

But the statistics for deaths by suicide and drug overdoses among construction workers show that paying attention to mental health is warranted in addition to addressing physical health. “We’re not spending as much time working on mental health and changing attitudes about suicide and opioid overdoses as we are on PPE when it comes to contractors and our membership,” said Curtis Ohlde, a leader of the recently established Local 533 peer mental health support program. “Those are things that we probably need to spend a little more time working on and letting our membership know about.”

The union began setting up its mental health peer supporter program in 2022. Leaders say the program is helping to remove the stigma around mental health issues.

Seeing the Need, Fortuitous Connections

In 2021, Kevin Hendrickson, Local 533 business manager, and Luke Moylan, a union business agent and chairman of the health and welfare fund, met Nancy Spangler, Ph.D., who is a consultant for the American Psychiatric Association’s Partnership for Workplace Mental Health, at the International Foundation’s Annual Employee Benefits Conference in Denver, Colorado.

They told Spangler about their recent frustration in trying to help a struggling member find mental health resources. The union had also recently been hit with the untimely deaths of other members. “We just kept getting hammered with one thing after another,” Hendrickson recalled. The union didn’t know how to address these

issues, he admitted: “We work on pipes. We don’t work on people’s brains and emotions.”

“We said we would really like to do something, to offer some help so that our members don’t ever get to the point where they are considering hurting themselves or someone else,” Hendrickson said. “We’re a strong organization that takes care of each other.”

Hendrickson and Spangler stayed in touch following the conference. Eventually she and a colleague, Robin Todd, visited the union hall for a listening session about mental health with executive board members, forepersons, journeypersons, apprentices and instructors.

Spangler and Todd, who owns a Kansas City–area mindfulness training company, recognized that members already looked out for each other, but they were missing one essential element—training.

Setting Up a Program

Training

Spangler and Todd conducted a mental health awareness class and mindfulness meditation training for all employees in the business office and the apprentice training center.

The first peer support training program was offered to training center instructors, and about 20 volunteered to participate. Hendrickson explained that the union chose to start with instructors because of their comfort with brainstorming and creating new programs.

The formal training included a one-day in-person immersion session and three virtual follow-up sessions. Training focused on mental health awareness, mindfulness, available mental health resources, and how to reach out and be an active listener. “The peer supporter’s job is not to be a counselor,” Hendrickson stressed. “The vol-

unteer's job is simply to be someone who's there to listen without casting judgment."

Peer training was also offered to second-year through fifth-year apprentices, and the union now has about two dozen volunteer peer supporters who are available to help any of the union's 1,900 members as well as their family members.

Training will eventually be offered to all members who are interested. "Our goal is to have a system where at least once a year anyone who's interested in getting this training to be a volunteer will have the ability to get the training," Hendrickson said.

Communication and Logistics

Local 533 decided to have the union operate the program rather than the health and welfare fund for ease of setup, Hendrickson said. Ohlde and Patrick O'Hara, an instructor and Local 533 vice president, volunteered to lead the program.

The union contracted with a call center to establish a dedicated phone number for the program. Depending on the caller's needs, the operator will connect them to a crisis line or directly to a peer supporter.

The peer support program has a button on the Local 533 website home page, and the union designed stickers and magnets with a QR code that sends members to the peer support website. Ohlde also recently promoted the program on the *Fitter Talk* podcast that he hosts, and peer supporters were available at the union's health fair.

Getting Started Is Half the Battle

"If nothing else, I think we're seeing that the membership as a whole feels more comfortable to talk about struggles that they may be having," Hendrickson said. "And the inverse

side of that is our members are more receptive to listening to someone else without being judgmental." A future step will be to get contractors involved in the peer support training.

The union continues to promote the program and has not gathered any statistics on contacts, but Ohlde and O'Hara have been contacted personally by members, and other peer supporters have reported interactions. In addition, some employers have reached out to peer supporters looking for help with members on the jobsite.

One initial hurdle the union experienced with the program was that the peer support page was only accessible to members who logged into the website, and only a fraction had set up log-in credentials. Now the peer support program is easily accessible without requiring a log-in.

Local 533 has the advantage of already being a tight-knit group, O'Hara commented. For the past year, the peer supporters have been working on developing a protocol that formalizes that peer support.

Ohlde and O'Hara also are realizing how much training is available and how much more there is to learn. "The further we get into it, when it comes to training, there are always more things that we can pick up and improve on," Ohlde noted. "There are more resources out there that we are constantly finding out about."

"My advice would be no matter how much money you spend, it's all worth it if you save one person, and no matter how challenging it may seem to try to get something started, keep asking different people for different ideas and sooner or later somebody's going to come up with the idea that's going to get you to the next step," Hendrickson said.

