

City of Independence

State Safety Inspection

Kansas Department of Labor Inspects City Facilities

Dave Cowan, Director Safety/Fire-EMS/Code Enforcement
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City Manager's Office
City of Independence
811 West Laurel Street
Independence, KS 67301

City of Independence – State Safety Inspection

On January 02, 2019, Shane Etzold with the Kansas Department of Labor, Division of Industrial Safety and Health, conducted an inspection of all City of Independence facilities and shops. State of Kansas inspections are routinely scheduled every five years to ensure the city is providing safe working conditions and facilities and that safety policies and procedures are effectively being administered. While municipalities in the state of Kansas are not regulated by OSHA, the OSHA standards for inspection and compliance are the benchmarks used by the State of Kansas.

The City of Independence has had a safety program in place for more than 20 years, but faced a near-crisis situation in 2008, when workers' compensation insurance claims reached an all-time high, resulting in an astonishing annual premium rate of \$319,000. As a result of the increased claims, our insurance provider put us on notice that changes would be necessary to avoid cancellation of our policy.

As we investigated the root causes for our increased claims, we discovered a significant need to reinforce employee education about safe work practices as well as the appropriate use of workers' compensation insurance. Clearly, a true "culture" change was in order.

Under the direction of the City's safety director and with help from an insurance consultant, the City completely revamped its safety program in 2008. An employee-driven safety committee was formed, and safety policies were rewritten. Our goals were to empower our employees to take responsibility for creating an accident-free work environment and to foster a culture of safe practices within our organization.

As in any organization, changing the mindset and redesigning decades-old practices and systems was no small, or quick, undertaking. The key to our success was bringing our frontline employees into the discussion, giving them a voice and empowering them to lead. Changes in the early phases of the program remodel were often met with resistance, but the results became evident almost immediately, with injuries decreasing and our insurance premiums dropping by more than \$65,000 in one year.

Today, 11 years later, the City of Independence has a robust Safety Committee and has indeed developed a culture of safety throughout the organization. Premium rates have continued to improve and this year's cost is anticipated to be 41 percent lower than the 2008 figure.

STRATEGIC VISION: *Customer Service Excellence – Continuous Improvement – Teamwork*

During this month's inspection, Mr. Etzold was impressed with what he learned about the City of Independence's safety program. "Typically I find a lot of serious deficiencies when I visit a city, and I did not find that here," he said.

Even with improved statistics related to on-the-job injuries and insurance premiums, the City's safety committee recognizes that constant attention is required to keep safety top of mind within our organization. Therefore, the committee has planned further improvements to the overall program, including more employee participation and a mechanism for individual employee recognition to acknowledge their contributions to a positive safety culture.

Inspector Etzold has encouraged the city to submit its safety program to the State of Kansas for recognition by the Kansas Secretary of Labor and will be providing the safety committee with an application for that submission.

It should be noted the the City's safety committee and revision of the safety program over the years has consistently been fully supported by our city managers, including Paul Sasse, Mickey Webb and now Craig Whitehead. Additionally, credit is due all City employees for embracing the changes and working to make the City of Independence a safe place to work. While on-the-job injuries are sometimes unavoidable, our goal is to minimize risk and send our employees home safely after each day of work.