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Olean's Key to Success

Reprinted from Perma's Summer 2009 newsletter

Olean, a city of approximately 15,000 people in western New York operates a variety of municipal amenities for its residents, including a water and sewer facility, ice skating rink and swimming pool. It is "a small town where everybody's friendly, everybody knows everybody," says Jeff Voorhees of Southern Tier Agencies, Olean's broker.

Voorhees should know. He's a hometown boy and the guiding force behind the city's safety committee a rare occurrence for a broker. Before joining PERMA in 2003, Olean was not particularly safety-conscious. It had no active safety committee and recommendations from its former insurance carrier were not implemented. It took several large workers' compensation cases and a shrinking budget for Olean to focus on safety. With a new partner in PERMA, the city began to take action. As Janet Jones, the current City Auditor, puts it, "We needed people working, not on comp, so we had to beef up the safety program."

Right after Olean joined PERMA, a safety committee was formed. It stalled until the former City Auditor, Steve Pachla, got managers more interested in safety to join. But just as the committee was hitting its stride, Pachla left the city. Pete Archbold, PERMA senior loss control representative, noticed the committee stopped meeting regularly. "Pete told me the city had to get its act together," says Voorhees, so he stepped in, enhancing the committee with active members like Mark Whiteman, the water superintendent, as well as the buildings and codes supervisor, the police chief, the city clerk, Jones and Archbold. "Everybody brings a lot to the table," says Voorhees. The committee meets quarterly and meetings are attended by all supervisors in the public works, fire and police departments. Each supervisor is required to monitor the safety compliance of his or her own department. The DPW also holds well-attended weekly "tailgate" meetings. The meetings deal with a variety of topics, including those reviewed in PERMA safety videos, OSHA regulations, and the city's safety manual, and are about 10 to 15 minutes long.

For the past year, Olean has been utilizing a PERMA safety grant that pays for various training, but the city hasn't stopped there. They have partnered with Compliance Management International (CMI) to utilize a \$17,500 safety grant Olean received from the New York State Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Bureau. To date, Olean has completed over 100 hours of CMI's training in areas such as electronics, confined spaces and workplace violence. The state grant expires at the end of July, but Voorhees, instrumental in its procurement, will pursue another grant at the end of the year.

Olean also focuses on wellness, combining resources and a wellness grant from PERMA along with resources of its health insurer, to put on a busy Wellness Fair at the beginning of the year, which was followed by a 16-week walking/weight loss challenge. Currently, they are operating a summer walking program and are planning a Wellness Fair for the fall. PERMA's Director of Medical Services, Genie Mayo, and Senior Patient Advocate, Maureen Flynn, work closely with the Olean Wellness Committee, and are impressed by the city's quick progress. "Their enthusiasm and commitment is truly commendable," says Mayo. By



utilizing this variety of resources, Olean has seen some wonderful results. "Over the past three years or so, the employees have been pretty responsive," says Jones. "Employee buy-in is key - safety can't be accomplished if our employees aren't willing to alter their habits." And safety has been accomplished: accident rates have gone way down, as has accident severity. The safety committee regularly reviews incident reports and loss runs, and all accidents, no matter the severity, are investigated. The investigations determine whether training to avoid a similar incident will be required.

"Overall, the City of Olean has done a remarkable job in maintaining an effective safety program during these difficult times," says Pete Archbold. And because of Olean's proactive stance on workplace health and safety, its PERMA annual premium has gone down 43% since 2005. The city has accomplished a great deal, but it will continue in its quest for lower losses... and lower premiums. And it will continue to utilize what PERMA has to offer. Jones says it best: "PERMA has a wealth of resources and has been willing to help. You only have to reach out for it."

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