

Builders battle opioid epidemic

By: Chuck Slothower in Construction December 5, 2019 12:17 pm



SafeBuild Alliance and the Oregon Health Authority are teaming to provide contractors with opioid overdose reversal kits. (Sam Tenney/DJC)

It was at a national company meeting in Miami that **Skanska USA Building**'s Steve Clem heard of a program to save the lives of opioid abusers in the construction industry.

A manager in the construction giant's Boston office talked about opioid addiction and how it affects the construction industry in that city. He also explained naloxone, a potentially life-saving drug that can reverse opioid overdoses if properly administered.

“For some reason it just resonated with me,” said Clem, who serves as a senior vice president for project planning services and sustainability in Skanska’s Portland office.

He brought his concern about opioid overdoses to the **SafeBuild Alliance**, a nonprofit based in Gresham that provides construction safety education and training. Clem serves on SafeBuild’s board.

SafeBuild Alliance soon launched a program in partnership with the **Oregon Health Authority**, which provides kits for administering the medication but not the drug itself. Member companies are responsible for supplying the naloxone, administered as a nasal spray, at a cost of about \$75 per two-pack. SafeBuild Alliance conducts training with construction workers and works with a Multnomah County physician to provide naloxone, which is also known by the brand names Narcan and Evzio.

Clem said he’s not aware of any local incidents of jobsite opioid overdoses. Nevertheless, Skanska has placed the antidote at jobsites since last summer.

It makes sense to get ahead of the problem, said Karen Blythe, executive director of the SafeBuild Alliance.

“There have been overdose situations I’ve heard of — not necessarily in the Portland area — but we know there’s an opioid epidemic here. So it’s just a matter of time, and we want people to be aware and know how to respond,” Blythe said.

Besides Skanska, other major contractors including **Mortenson Construction** and **Howard S. Wright** have participated in the opioid overdose training program.

Opioid addiction has hit the construction industry particularly hard as doctors overprescribed the medications for muscular-skeletal injuries and chronic pain, which are common among construction workers, said Cal Beyer, director of risk management for **Lakeside Industries** in Issaquah, Washington.

Prescriptions for opioids such as oxycodone and hydrocodone surged in the U.S. Abusers found the drugs could be crushed and snorted.

The drugs have been a key element in the “deaths of despair” that have lowered life spans around the nation, Beyer said. “Opioids made the existing issue with mental health and suicides a perfect storm,” he said.

The stigma around mental health issues extended to opioids, while illegal drugs still attracted far more public attention, Beyer said. More recently, awareness has improved, leading many doctors to tighten their opioid prescription practices and to more treatment and prevention programs.

SafeBuild launched its program earlier this year, and the plan is to make it an ongoing effort. "We have every intention of providing more training in 2020 and to raise more awareness," Blythe said.

Training materials tell responders to first check for breathing and attempt to awaken the person who may be overdosing. After that, they're instructed to call 911, begin chest compressions and then use naloxone if the victim has not responded.

Blythe compared naloxone to the automated external defibrillator units that many workplaces keep on hand in case of heart attacks.

"It's part of their first aid, like they would use an AED," she said. "It's part of their first aid training."

Responders won't do any harm by using naloxone, even if the person is not overdosing, said Clem. "It's another tool," he said.

Naloxone's shelf life is about 18 months. Skanska will donate any unused doses to clinics, allowing them to use it before it expires, Clem said.

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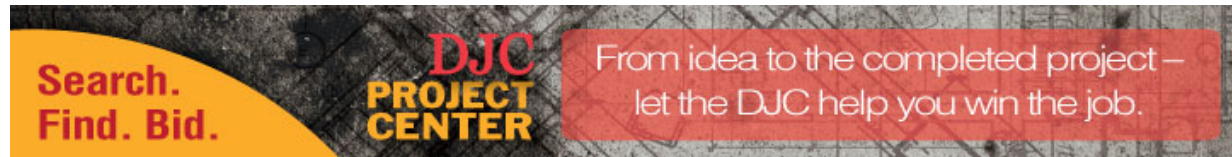
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