Safe-in-Sound Awards Excellence in Hearing Loss Prevention

The previous issue of *Spectrum* featured 2009 Safe in Sound™ award winners from the Manufacturing sector. This issue describes the award-winning programs from the Services sector and the Innovation Award.

Montgomery County Water Services: Above and Beyond

"Even though we are not covered under OSHA, we make it a point to go above and beyond those requirements in all our health and safety programs," said Connie Muncy of the Montgomery County Water Services (MCWS) of Kettering, Ohio, the 2009 recipient of the Safe-in-Sound Award™ in the Services sector. "We use all the resources at our disposal to make sure we are providing a safe and healthy workplace."

One of those resources is the Ohio Bureau of Worker's Compensation (BWC). BWC provides support services for health and safety programs in the state, and when industrial hygienist Ken Wilson visited MCWS to review their hearing loss prevention program, he suggested they apply for the Safe-in-Sound Award™. According to Muncy, "the recommendations Ken made to help us improve our program were very helpful in putting us in position to receive the award."

Another key to success is collaboration among the "players" participating in and responsible for the program. "The support shown by upper management, first-line supervisors, our employees, safety officers and safety committee, and outside experts is what makes our program strong," Muncy said. "Collaboration and cooperation form the basis of our program."

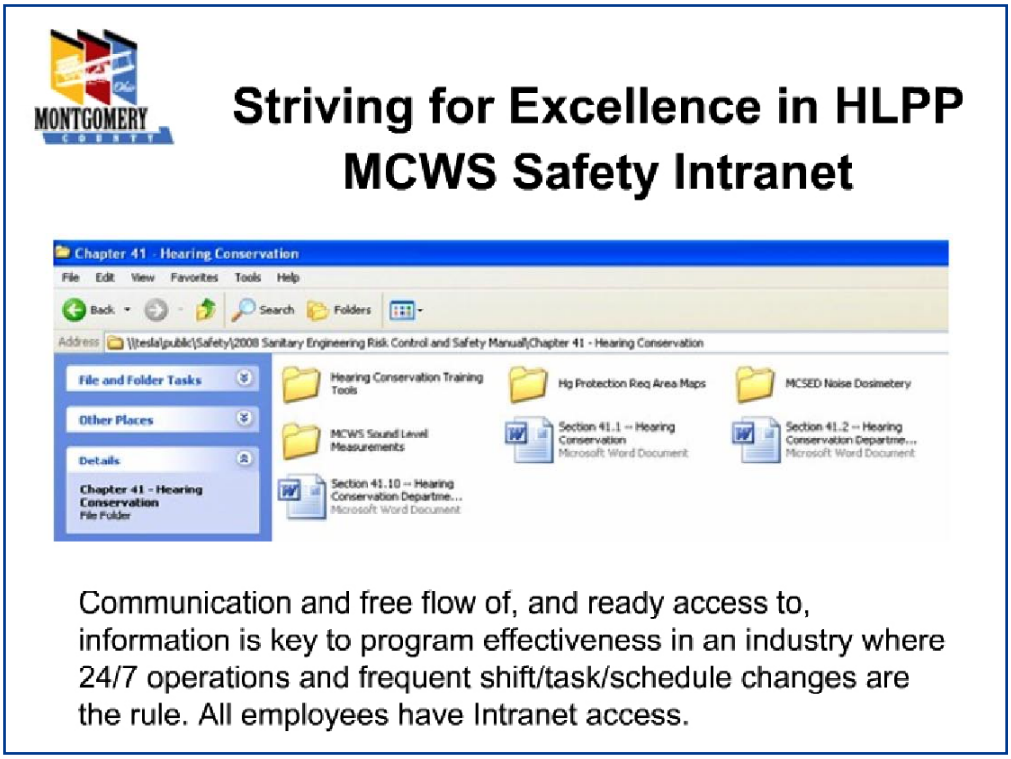
Noise exposure for MCWS employees is difficult to assess, since jobs, equipment used, and responsibilities change day to day. "We are a 24/7 operation," said Muncy, "so we need to rely on supplements to face-to-face training and meetings to keep people up to speed. Our supervisors post health and safety information in work areas, and we use an intranet system to put noise exposure information out where people can see it."

One of the key aspects of the intranet noise section is a noise database, where tools and operations are identified with their associated noise levels. "That way, people can look at the intranet website, look up what they are scheduled to do each day, and make sure they are carrying the appropriate PPE (personal protective equipment), including hearing protection," according to Muncy.

Much of the information included in the noise database was collected by front-line employees. Muncy indicated that "getting easy-to-use noise measurement equipment and putting it in the hands of the workers who make the noise encourages buy-in and cooperation with the rest of the program. As a CIH (certified industrial hygienist), I provide oversight and training, but when the workers can see the noise related to their work directly and hands-on, they accept the results without question and take the appropriate protective steps."

To further communication, noise measurement results are translated to maps when appropriate. "For our fixed locations, like wastewater plants, we post maps that show the noise reduction rating of hearing protection required in high noise areas," according to Muncy. "We manage all of the derating before the map is produced, so workers can select appropriate hearing protection without having to think about that step in the process."

MCWS makes a wide variety of hearing protectors available to noise-exposed workers. A range of earplugs, canal caps, and earmuffs means that everyone can find something that works. "We have had very good luck with sound restoration earmuffs — the ones that bring in outside noise electronically, but limit it to a safe level," said Muncy. "These products are very well received, as they allow better verbal communication between workers."



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Another key outside resource for MCWS is their hearing test provider. "We provide exposure information, including dosimetry results and tool sound levels to our audiometric service provider," Muncy indicated, "allowing them to do the best possible job of interpreting audiograms and making sense of all of the information."

Program assessment is a critical aspect of program success. MWCS uses a range of leading and lagging indicators to measure how well the program is operating, including looking at the number of audiograms provided to ensure 100% compliance with that aspect of the program; participation in annual hearing conservation training; posting of high noise areas; and updating of the noise charts, maps, and database.

Muncy is also unafraid to share her experiences and knowledge gains from participation in the Safe in Sound process. "I will be presenting on the MCWS hearing loss prevention program and Safe in Sound experience at the Ohio Water Environment Association this summer, and have submitted to speak at ASSE (American Society of Safety Engineers) on our experience in 2010," said Muncy. "We are also looking at ways to share our noise database with other people both inside and outside our industry."

Above and beyond indeed! Look for more details and the award presentation at http://www.safeinsound.us/swf/Montgomery/index.html

Sensaphonics: New Technologies for an Underserved Population

Safe-in-Sound granted an award in 2009 for Innovation in Hearing Loss Prevention to Sensaphonics, Inc. of Chicago. Founder and President Michael Santucci, building from his backgrounds in music and audiology, established Sensaphonics to address the hearing loss prevention needs of musicians and sound engineers with a range of products and services targeted to this underserved population. The company also works with other high-noise, unregulated industries, including aeronautics, motorsports, and broadcast.

Sensaphonics focuses in four areas:

- Audiology services, assessing the hearing abilities and needs of musicians both in the Chicago area and nationally.
- Product development, especially in the area of high-fidelity custom-fit in-ear monitoring systems.
- Manufacturing, permitting them to maintain quality control over the custom-fit earpieces that serve as the basis for many of their products.
- Education, as they spread their expertise in this area of hearing loss prevention both within the music industry and to other audiologists nationwide, hosting the Sensaphonics "Golden Circle" training seminars and mentoring AuD students, or audiologists-in-training.

"Our objective," said Santucci, "is the preservation of the musicians' most critical instrument — their ears. Twenty years ago, the music industry was a classic example of a patient in denial. Louder was simply better. This attitude caught up to many in the field, however, as the tinnitus they received from excessive sound levels drove them to seek help."

Partnerships are crucial to the success of this effort, but not the partnerships typically found in hearing conservation programs. "To work with musicians, you need to work with the groups and organizations that are pertinent to them. We have partnered with Shure, a leading manufacturer of microphones and sound reinforcement equipment, as well as the people who manage the Grammy Awards; Clair Brothers, the largest touring sound company in the world; and the Audio Engineering Society. Of course, we work with the audiologists and academics as well, but it is critical to relate to musicians where they live."

It can be challenging to meet the needs — let alone the schedules and logistics — of the Sensaphonics target audience. Santucci and his team regularly take earmold fitting services and product delivery to the musician, meeting the players on their own turf. "Seeing our musician clients in action gives us a much better sense of what their needs are, and helps us to find way to meet them," according to Santucci. "Developing products and services to meet the needs of this special, unique, and unregulated population has been challenging, but rewarding."

Sensaphonics award presentation is available at http://www.safeinsound.us/swf/Sensaphonics/index.html