

KEEPING SAFE AND WELL: A NEW APPROACH

A new approach to health and safety led by Corrections has already seen increased leadership and co-operation across government agencies. Why does Corrections have this role and how does government collaboration mesh with departmental responsibility? MARGARET McLACHLAN found out.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 was a game changer. It shifted the focus from monitoring and recording health and safety incidents only to proactively identifying and managing risks. Everyone has a role to play, and in particular chief executives must make sure the business understands and is meeting its health and safety responsibilities. Employee engagement and representation now hold a much more central position as well.

“In health and safety, the accountability sits with senior leaders – chief executives and their most senior people. But the State Services Commission has seen the potential for collaboration and resourcing across the government sector. SSC mandated the Department of Corrections to undertake the new system role of Government Health and Safety Lead,” explains Vince Arbuckle, Deputy Chief Executive at Corrections, who is leading the initiative on behalf of the Chief Executive, Ray Smith.

This takes the model of other functional leads that already exist in areas such as procurement and ICT, but the approach here will be different in recognition of the legal accountabilities that sit with CEs.

Corrections was chosen as the lead agency as it has experience in managing a high level of risk in its operations and has demonstrated its commitment to health and safety. It won the ‘best board-level engagement’ in health and safety award at the NZ Workplace Health and Safety Awards 2017, an award recognising the leadership of Ray Smith and his senior team.

“The Government Health & Safety Lead was established in August 2017 as a collaborative, co-operative venture involving 31 core government departments, including the NZ Police. Four agencies – Housing New Zealand, New Zealand Defence Force, Accident Compensation Commission and Fire & Emergency NZ – are key players. Altogether, it encompasses 35 agencies and over 80,000 staff who have mostly similar governance structures, manage some extremely risky operations, frequently

have common clients and are mandated to deliver often complex services for all New Zealanders,” says Arbuckle.

“We’ve involved and taken advice from private sector companies on our Expert Advisory Panel, such as Air New Zealand, Fonterra, Z Energy and Auckland University of Technology. They bring a different and external perspective to the health and safety discussion. We’ve also worked with unions as key partners and sought their involvement and advice throughout.”

Andrew Crisp, Chief Executive of LINZ, welcomes the new cross-government approach.

“I think it’s really important that we, as government agency chief executives, share our learnings and challenges and think quite hard about how we drive forward health and safety across the government sector.

“We need to keep one another honest and encourage one another to keep the pedal down. Resources can be shared across the system; we’ve all done different things and it’s about how we get ourselves on the same page.



Andrew Crisp

“We want our staff to go home every day in the same state – or better – than they arrived in the morning. This is a good step-change to build on what others have done.”

Physical security

Despite only being underway for a few months, a work plan, strategy and resources have been agreed, says Arbuckle.

There are many strands to the work plan, including physical security across government service delivery areas. This is partly in response to the WINZ tragedy in Ashburton on 1 September 2014 in which two employees were killed.

“How can agencies make workplaces safe while delivering services to their, often vulnerable, clients?



Vince Arbuckle

“In 2016/17 the SSC led cross-system work to look at how to support agencies to address this question. It sought to provide practical guidance on priority aspects of physical security. Things like safe building design, relative to risk, and balancing the needs of staff, the public and service delivery, while being practical and affordable,” says Arbuckle.

The Physical Security Knowledge Bank went live on the PSR website in October. It provides shared access to good practice guides to improve physical security. The Government Health & Safety Lead will have future oversight of the Knowledge Bank, in conjunction with the NZSIS, adding to the available resources, including a guide for government staff on practical steps to stay safe.

“Each agency has to decide how to implement the guidance, based on its own risk profile. For example, here at Corrections’ head office, we have security gates that staff and visitors need a swipe card to enter. That’s proportionate to our risk but will not be necessary for many other agencies with lesser risk profiles.

Future plans

“It’s an exciting area of work but we need to be disciplined to deliver to the biggest demand. In 2018 we’ll deliver some benefits quickly in areas that matter most including mental health, lone-worker safety and appropriate sharing of client information,” says Arbuckle.

A practical way the Government Health & Safety Lead is supporting agencies is by establishing a Health and Safety Summer Intern Programme for 2017/18. Ten agencies will participate this year and have been matched with 10 students studying health and safety selected from over 70 applicants.

“There’s a shortage of qualified people in the health and safety area, so this will be something to help grow the workforce, and help generate ideas for the government,” Arbuckle says.

“We’ve also hosted 30 public service chief executives recently at a session where they reflected on their leadership of health and safety, learning from the experience of Steve Carden, Chief Executive of Landcorp.”

Health and safety also includes staff and client safety and wellbeing and health.

“We are working together to collaborate and develop shared resources. For example, many Government workers drive vehicles as part of their daily routine, so we could work with agencies to understand the common risks and controls, sharing resources and good practice wherever it makes sense.”

Another issue is the security of workers when working out of the office, such as when visiting people in their homes. Safety responses could include alarms, advice about where to park, how to recognise danger signs, and having a buddy system in place.

A topical concern is around stress and mental health. Chief executives are responsible for the mental health of their staff, including how it affects co-workers.

“Some agencies are doing very good work in this area; for example Police and the Police Association have recently released resources for front-line staff including an app for self-assessment of wellbeing and mental health.”

Strong support

The Government Health & Safety Lead approach is supported by the NZ Business Leaders’ Health & Safety Forum. Executive Director François Barton says the Forum has been a strong supporter and encourages this collaborative approach across the public sector.

“It’s a balanced, coherent programme of work, and it has commitment from the top. This gives me real confidence we can build the culture and in turn drive better performance. The government has taken a unique step with coherence, commitment and the opportunity to build competence,” Barton says.

He notes the potential for government to be a leader in some areas, for example managing psychosocial (mental health) risk. He’d like to see increased sharing between public and private sector CEOs, for example on work-related health improvements where he thinks the government could play a transformational role.

“Health and Safety is complex and dynamic; where there’s work happening, there’s risk. How do we make sense of that complexity?”

“There’s no way that technical management of health and safety alone will deliver effective change. But bringing leadership to

that challenge provides the ability to lift the bar higher. The government has huge reach, extending to tens of thousands of workers and even more suppliers and contractors. Leadership is important if we want to lift the performance of the sector,” Barton says.



François Barton

Learning from one another

WorkSafe New Zealand is the government health and safety regulator. Alan Cooper, Chief Advisor, Better Regulation, says health and safety is more successful when an industry or sector collaborates and drives its own solutions.

“The value is that various agencies can learn from one another, particularly around the risks and risk assessments, and come up with appropriate responses,” Cooper says.



Alan Cooper

“The government sector will see a lot of benefits in collaborating, including developing capability in terms of assessing and managing risk. The risk profile will look different depending on each department, and you need to be careful not to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, but there are advantages in collaborating where appropriate.”

He says that as New Zealand’s health and safety system matures, the opportunity to learn from one another across the public and private sectors is huge. One of the challenges when industries see themselves as unique is that it shuts down collaboration.

WorkSafe supports collaboration and the use of common tools. It welcomes the move by government agencies to adopt the SafePlus audit programme.

“Some audit programmes just focus on systems and documentation. SafePlus

dives deeper into performance and behaviour, which gives you an insight into whether you’ve adopted plans into actions,” Cooper says.

He says historically health and safety focused on high-frequency, low-impact injuries.

“But it’s wrong to focus on lost-time injury alone. We should be increasingly focused on the critical risks that arise from the work of our organisations and on controls to minimise the likelihood of people being killed or suffering life-changing illness or harm,” Cooper says.

Vince Arbuckle says the Government Health & Safety Lead programme will also develop guidance on governance, working with the Institute of Directors. Most of the government sector is in the relatively unique position of operating large, complex agencies without formal boards. Public service CEOs must both manage their agencies and add a governance dimension. The guidance will include due diligence responsibilities and establishing innovative reporting practices, for example, encouraging the greater use of lead indicators such as health and safety prevention measures.

“If you look at previous accident data alone you’re looking at what has happened which *may* not be the best indicator of what may happen in the future. It’s also not an indicator of the rare but catastrophic event that could lead to serious injury or loss of life for a staff member, contractor or member of the public. Increasingly, safety is being seen as not just the absence of injury or harm but also the presence of controls that are designed to both reduce the incidence and consequences of potential adverse events.

“CEs must put aside the data from time to time and think deeply about their core business and what are the real risks that could happen and the mitigation measures in each agency. The government has to send a strong signal to New Zealand that everyone needs to lift their game, including the government sector.”

The new Health and Safety at Work Act has increased the awareness and senior leaders in an organisation need to be driving this throughout their organisation. New Zealand still has much to do as it still doesn’t compare well with some other countries.

Alan Cooper says of the government response, “It’s a significant initiative and a real opportunity for cross-government leadership and collaboration between government and private industries. WorkSafe is pleased to be actively supporting the programme from our Chief Executive level down.”

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