

One of the most popular adages in today's world is undoubtedly the saying, "safety first". This short proverb expresses a very important idea: that human life should always be the highest priority in any situation. This particularly applies to the workplace, where unsafe actions can add up to disastrous consequences for workers and those around them. Ben Bella, the Safety and Loss Control Manager for the Eau Claire, Jackson, Oakdale, and Riverland Electric Cooperatives, is an expert on this topic. In his presentation at YLC 2023, he spoke about workplace safety and the consequences of unsafe behavior, which are important topics for cooperatives of all kinds.

Workplace accidents are unfortunately prevalent in the United States. According to Ben Bella, 15 workers die from job-related injuries every day. As he explained, the number of unsafe behaviors is difficult to track, but can be inferred from the concept of the safety pyramid. This pyramid is a visual representation of the consequences of problematic actions or conditions: the closer you get to the tip of the pyramid, the less likely but more severe the consequence is. This model explains that for every 300,000 risky behaviors, there are 30,000 near misses or minor accidents, 300 more serious accidents, 30 severe accidents, and one fatality. Using this model, he can estimate that 4.5 million unsafe workplace actions happen across the U.S. every day. The vast majority of these unsafe behaviors are completely preventable by solutions as simple as being aware of those around oneself.

Another thing Bella talked about was how the same concept of safety can be applied to driving. Behaviors like distracted driving, despite sometimes seeming harmless, can have a very harmful effect on roadway safety. Knowing how to prevent unnecessary risks and handle potentially harmful situations correctly goes a long way toward lowering the chances of an accident. Working for electric cooperatives, one of those potentially harmful situations he has

experience with is car crashes involving power lines. He expressed the correct way of handling the situation: always assume the lines are energized, call 911, and stay in the car unless circumstances absolutely require you to leave. If you need to leave, jump onto the ground with both feet together, avoiding a possible voltage difference.

Bella's message of safety fits right in with the Youth Leadership Congress's theme of cooperatives and cooperation. Cooperatives of all types are created to serve the community ("Concern for Community" being number seven on the seven cooperative principles), and a cooperative could not do that effectively without a consideration for the safety of its members and employees. Additionally, a lack of safety measures could cause the members to lose faith in their cooperative and even discontinue their membership. A cooperative is nothing without the individuals that it serves, and a disregard for safety would be directly against those individuals.

Jump River Electric, my sponsoring cooperative, follows strict regulations set by the Rural Electric Safety Achievement Program to ensure workplace safety. "JREC's number one priority is keeping their employees, members, and the community safe. One way we do this is by following the highest safety standards set out by the RESAP program. Monthly safety meetings are held for our linemen, and at times our office employees, where they complete training on a variety of safety topics," said Denise Zimmer, an employee at Jump River Electric Cooperative. At times such as while fixing power lines after a storm, a lack of awareness or ensuring a safe environment could cause serious injury and delay repairs, as well as discourage other cooperatives from assisting. This focus on safety, for which they have earned nineteen RESAP accreditations, allows them to function smoothly as a cooperative and avoid unnecessary injuries.

Safety is a cornerstone of life. As Ben Bella emphasized, unsafe behaviors can have major consequences. Cooperatives have a focus on community and improving human life; this is why they especially should always follow safety rules. A commitment to safety helps them serve their members and protect their employees, ensuring cooperatives can continue to benefit their communities for years to come.