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# CHAMPIONS

Every year, *NU's* Excellence in Workers' Compensation Risk Management Award is given to three organizations that demonstrate exceptional loss-control, safety and return-to-work programs. They are among the top performers in managing workers' comp costs, all of them with unique success stories to share.

This year's winners are Butterball LLC, Cherokee County, Ga., and Nations Roof LLC, all of which will be recognized on Aug. 7 during the general session at the 72nd annual Workers' Compensation Educational Conference (WCEC), set for Aug. 6-9 at the Orlando World Center Marriott in Florida. The 2017 award is co-sponsored by Safety National and Sedgwick.

On Aug. 8 from 9:45-11 a.m., *NU* Editor-in-Chief Shawn Moynihan will lead a special panel discussion (presented as part of the conference's "National Trends in Workers' Compensation" track) during which attendees can learn the secrets behind these award-winning programs directly from award winners Robert Alford, human resources manager for Cherokee County, Ga.; Nations Roof Director of Risk Management Neftali Ortiz; and Brian Rodgers, Butterball's senior director of corporate risk management.

Presented by the Workers' Compensation Institute, WCEC is the largest conference of workers' comp-related professionals of its kind in the U.S. and offers a vast program of breakout sessions featuring hundreds of speakers.

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and red patterned tie stands on a rooftop construction site. He is smiling and holding a large roll of white blueprints. In the background, there are city buildings and construction cranes under a clear sky.

# Up on the ROOF

A SHIFT IN FOCUS TO SAFETY TRAINING, INJURY PREVENTION, CONTINUING EDUCATION AND COMPANY-WIDE ACCOUNTABILITY PAYS OFF IN A BIG WAY FOR NATIONS ROOF

BY CATERINA PONTORIERO

If you have acrophobia, proceed with caution. For employees at Nations Roof LLC, working on top of structures as tall as 50 stories is the norm. From new construction in New York City to reroofing in Boise, Idaho, the company's roofers are exposed to extreme risks such as fatal falls and heat illnesses. Not surprisingly, these are the top sources of workers' compensation claims for the fast-growing national roofing contractor.

In just four years, Nations Roof has grown 61% in revenue and has been ranked fourth on roofing industry trade magazine *Roofing Contractor's* Top 100 Roofing Contractors list. Yet while the company has been experiencing this tremendous growth, claims frequency throughout its 22 offices in the U.S. has decreased by 25%.

The secret to this notable reduction? A shift in focus to safety training, injury prevention and accountability throughout the company, starting at the top with Nations Roof's CEO down to the foremen in the field. Here's how the addition of Director of Risk Management Neftali Ortiz has been key to the Atlanta-based roofing contractor's achievement.

## INVESTING IN PEOPLE

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), falls accounted for 364 out of 937 deaths in construction in 2015, so it isn't surprising that falls are the most common source of Workers' Comp claims for Nations Roof. But with a focus on employee safety, Ortiz set out to prevent the contractor's employees from contributing to that statistic.

When Ortiz joined Nations Roof two-and-a-half years ago, he was given the financial freedom to make the appropriate equipment and procedural changes to not only reduce claims frequency, but also to protect and retain employees no matter what capacity they work in. One of the first steps in creating his risk management program was to hire two regional risk engineers who divide handling risks and safety for the company's locations in the Eastern and Western U.S.

"They're the ones who have rapport with the employees," Ortiz explains. "They see them on a daily basis and at monthly meetings, and that level of openness helps us."

Expanding on that level of transparency, Ortiz implemented daily safety inspections by staff at all locations. Additionally, the risk management program includes more than 1,000 inspections a year by certified safety personnel.

"That's where we've seen [our biggest] success," says Ortiz. "It brings accountability to our employees, that we're having certified safety personnel come into your jobs — an unbiased approach on how we could get better."

## FOCUS ON PREVENTION

An increased budget for fall-protection equipment has aided in reducing injuries. Under Ortiz's direction, Nations Roof has invested in 100% retractable life lines and temporary guardrails to protect employees from falls. "I have over 9.2 miles of guardrails in my company," Ortiz says. "What does that do? I'm mitigating the risk. I'm eliminating the falls, which is one of the biggest exposures we have in construction."

Additionally, Nations Roof partnered

with the National Roofing Contractor Association (NRCA) on training employees in the importance of fall prevention. The eight-hour Fall Protection A-Z Program updates employees on fall protection and includes current OSHA state plan requirements, complete with hands-on equipment demonstrations and techniques for self-rescue.

Heat illnesses are another area of concern Ortiz focused on, implementing a prevention program specific to every project and its exposure to high temperatures. Each site has to include a hydration station stocked with professional-grade hydration sports drink Sqwincher and a heart-monitoring device to ensure that workers stay



hydrated and are safe from the potential of illnesses or even death from heat exposure.

### CONTINUING EDUCATION

Nations Roof requires its employees to participate in a semi-annual safety day that covers training on potential risks they may face on projects. The company also hosts a safety seminar once a year at the Georgia Tech Global Learning Center in Atlanta, which Ortiz calls “the best occupational safety school in the nation.” A safety director from every office is flown in to be updated on new equipment and laws.

“This is a constant state of education from a management level down to the employee,” Ortiz adds.

“After 90 days of employment, we’re already giving our guys OSHA 10 hours as a requirement,” he continues. “Every superintendent that comes through the door has an OSHA 30. We’re raising the bar on what OSHA’s expecting, and I don’t throw OSHA standards at anybody because we already exceed them.”

### AGING WORKFORCE

Another area of concern for Nations Roof has been retaining employees as they age and become more susceptible to soft-tissue injuries. “In our field, the average age of our guys is 45 years old,” Ortiz explains.

In response, Nations Roof created a transition program for employees who have increased difficulty completing the tasks they once did and it places them into roles with less exposure.

“Rather than being a roofer that’s on a job for eight hours a day, what about a service technician who’s on the job for two hours a day?” Ortiz asks. “They’re able to train and teach somebody else. It’s a good transition for us, specifically in roofing, to be able to put somebody in a job that is less risky, but they’re still able to complete a task.”

### BUFFERING EMPLOYEE SELECTION

Employee selection was also highlighted as an area in which preventive measures could result in a reduction of claims. On the advice of Nations Roof’s broker, Pompano Beach, Fla.-based

Frank H. Furman Inc., the company began to use a pre-employment assessment program called Exemplar, which profiles an applicant’s predictive behavior contributing to risky behavior.

“Exemplar helps us recognize employees that have different tendencies,” Ortiz explains. “It’ll let you know if they are more likely to submit a workers’ comp claim, or don’t listen to instructions.”

Yet the human element isn’t completely removed with the new screening process. “There’s some reservations as far as language barrier and education levels,” says Ortiz. He explains that the Exemplar reports are reviewed to make sure there aren’t factors like those that can throw off an applicant’s profile.

“It’s a process of evaluation,” he says. “We’re able to weed out some of the ones that aren’t [affected by outside factors], and that’s where it’s good.

“It really comes down to ‘What’s your safety experience?’” Ortiz adds. “Questions like that throw people off, and then you start finding out the culture that somebody came from.”

### THE HUMAN FACTOR

At the heart of Nations Roof’s risk management program is a genuine interest in keeping employees safe and communicating that to them.

“There’s a human factor in what we do on the construction side,” Ortiz says. “You can train and have all of the state-of-the-art equipment — which is great — but, if the employee chooses not to do it, it’s all in vain.

“I always start my training by saying, ‘Hey, how many of you are here because you love to roof? If you won the lottery, would you be here tomorrow?’” Ortiz says. More often than not, employees end up agreeing when he asks: “How many of you guys are here because you have to provide?”

“And it’s so cliché to say ‘We want you to go home safe,’ like every single safety guy says,” he continues. “It’s another thing when you say ‘First off, you’re a great employee. We like the work that you do, but there’s some things that we’re going to have to change.’”

“It’s just affirmation,” Ortiz explains. “To retain employees, you have to communicate, and that’s kind of helped us in our approach.”

### SUPPORT FROM THE TOP

Ortiz insists that a major cornerstone to Nations Roof’s Workers’ Comp risk management program has been the support he’s gotten from the company’s top executives, namely CEO Rich Nugent and President Jake Hyatt.

“Most guys’ first concern is, ‘How much do I have to spend?’” Ortiz explains. “Our CEO says, ‘I care for our guys and I don’t want anything to happen on my watch.’”

As a result, Ortiz has been able to receive the proper funding for Nations Roof’s successful programs. Having leadership that is willing to invest in safety has made Ortiz’s job easy, he says. “I’ve invested \$2 million in safety since 2016,” he marvels. “\$2 million!”

That budget assistance has also helped forge the strong relationships Nations Roof now has with third-party administrator Sedgwick and insurance carrier XL Catlin.

“I’m always focusing on the top because to have my CEO involved in my process is pretty impressive for a company our size,” Ortiz says. “[Nugent is] CC’ed on any claim that’s open, and he responds! ‘What’s going on? Is everybody OK? Was there any bodily injury?’ The fact that I have that, that’s our success.”

Accountability and communication from top to bottom at Nations Roof is one of the most impressive aspects of Ortiz’s position.

“I’m Puerto Rican, and we have a large Latin population,” he explains. “To be able to talk to our guys directly in Spanish one minute, then with the CEO and executives [in English] the next, it keeps the humility in what we do. No one’s better than anyone else. Nobody has a job more important than someone else’s.

“Honestly, my job is fun,” Ortiz adds. “We’re doing something in construction that not too many contractors are doing. We’ve raised the bar, and the results are there.” 