

SAFETY FOR NONPROFITS (S4NP) Q&A With Jack Geissert, Founder & President

Safety For NonProfits Inc. (S4NP), launched by ASSP member Jack Geissert, is establishing a system for delivering pro bono professional workplace safety and health services to the charitable nonprofit sector. PSJ spoke with Jack about how the organization connects nonprofit groups with OSH professionals.

Jack Geissert

Jack Geissert, CIH, is founder and president of Safety For NonProfits Inc. (S4NP). He has worked for 45 years to enhance worker safety and health. As a professional in leadership roles, he has been a key technical expert and functional manager for environment, health, safety and loss prevention for major companies in the vaccine and biopharmaceutical, semiconductor and computer manufacturing, and environmental remediation industries.

Jack is coauthor of the forthcoming book, *Don't Forget the Worker: Stories of Workplace Safety and Health*. He is an emeritus professional member of the Greater Boston Chapter.

PSJ: Tell us a little bit about this project.

Jack: S4NP is a startup. Our mission is to establish a system that allows OSH professionals to provide their services pro bono in their communities with the charities that they support. Some of the other professions actually do this very well, for example, the legal and accounting professions. What we're trying to do is create the same kind of system.

PSJ: How did the organization get started? What was the impetus behind this project?

Jack: It started out, actually, because of a personal experience of mine. I've had more than 4 decades of professional OSH experience. In my retirement, I started to work on a local level with one of my charities, a furniture bank. I reinvented myself; instead of being an OSH professional, I became a furniture mover and a truck driver for this furniture bank based out of the Boston area. It provides 55 families a week with a full home of furniture, kitchenware, household goods, linens, towels, everything. We do this by receiving donations of used home items from donors, and then we are able to provide it to the clients who are referred to us by social services agencies and churches and other places of worship. The household goods go to homeless veterans getting back on their feet, families escaping abusive domestic situations. I had supported this organization financially for about 20 years. And as I started to support them as a furniture mover and truck driver, I couldn't help but notice, as an OSH professional, that they had a lot of risk. There were a lot of near misses, a lot of injuries.

I approached the executive director and then, eventually, the board of directors. I recommended that they have a comprehensive end-to-end assessment of their operations. They have 950 volunteers ages 14 to 92, and about four employees. But they have trucks, they own a building and they move a lot of materials. They agreed to it, and I worked with them over a period of about 2 years. Now, they are significantly safer and a better operation as a result of this focused work.

As I did this work, I thought, for sure that there would be a function within our profession where the kind of volunteer work that I was doing was also encouraged and facilitated by our profession. What I found out is that, in fact, there was no such system that systematically promoted this kind of volunteerism by OSH professionals. So, I started to talk to some of my colleagues and told them about my experiences. We looked to see if someone else was doing this kind of work and maybe we just hadn't

recognized that. We started to talk to people within ASSP and American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA), both on a local as well as the national level. Out of that emerged, first, an informal project which we titled Safety for NonProfits, and then, based on feedback from the ASSP and AIHA, we decided the best way to set up this capability. We confirmed that there was a need. We confirmed that that fellow safety and health professionals would be willing to provide pro bono services. And the way we set up the governance is as an independent nonprofit organization.

PSJ: What are some examples of organizations that would be benefited by this program?

Jack: The nonprofit sector is very diverse. There are 1.3 million nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporations. These are public charities that include everything from the local community Boy Scouts to food relief, food pantries, homeless shelters and environmental charities, educational charities and the arts. They work for the common good. What we have found is that while there are certain large nonprofit organizations that may have some formal programs, when it comes down to the work that employees and volunteers at nonprofits do every day, there are too many people being injured and too many people dying on the job doing volunteer work. Every week in America, on average there is one volunteer who dies doing volunteer work.

PSJ: Can you explain a little more about how it works? What types of services do these groups typically need from safety professionals?

Jack: Even though those who are leading these charitable organizations are well-intentioned, in too many cases they do not have experience in how to structure and implement a proactive safety program. In particular, right now with COVID-19, most nonprofits have been shut down or dramatically affected. COVID-19 has had a huge impact. For example, one of the major homeless shelters in Boston had a COVID-19 positive test rate of close to 40%. In other cases, say in the case of the furniture bank that I support, they were shut down for 3 months. They're now returning to work but under very restricted conditions. One of the things that some of us are doing, in an informal way, is helping the nonprofits that we've worked with reopen safely.

Under normal conditions, before the pandemic, the main cause of workplace serious injuries and fatalities in the nonprofit sector was in transportation related incidents. This is similar to what we see in other sectors of our economy with different sectors of employers. Those are examples of what we would do.

We have three categories of services: awareness training, where we provide informational workshops to educate nonprofit leaders on the fundamentals; virtual advisory services, where we provide phone safety and health consultation; and on-site consultation, where we perform risk assessments, detailed safety reviews providing prioritized listings of areas for risk reduction and injury prevention.

PSJ: Do you find that organizations understand what safety professionals do?

Jack: I would say there's a low level of understanding of what an OSH professional can do for them, unless, in a previous employment situation, they had exposure to a progressive program. Maybe an OSHA VPP Star site or a large corporation or maybe a university where they're on the faculty and they've had exposure to good risk-based programs with well-resourced and competent professionals and a culture in line management. That's a rare example.

The thing is that many of the nonprofits and their management that we're trying to reach out to just has not had any exposure to worker safety and health. In most cases, what we need to do is bring them up to the basic level of understanding, and then we go from there. Once they have that understanding then what we need them to do is ask them

to request services from us and then we can start getting into the organization's specific safety and health issues that would be important to them, and develop a prioritized plan to address risk reduction where it's warranted.

It's really important to do that first step of awareness training. We have several proposals with state nonprofit organizations to deliver webinars to raise awareness with their membership. These are typically no-fee webinars so that there's no barrier to people attending this briefing on how workplace safety and health affects them, how to you know if they need to do something, what their duties are as a nonprofit leader, and where to go for help.

PSJ: How can OSH professionals get involved with your organization?

Jack: We're currently in phase two, the design and build phase. We're in the process of establishing a sustainable system that can support our members, our fellow OSH professionals, delivering services in their communities across the U.S. If someone wants to help us design and build the program, this is a great time to jump in. You can learn a lot and do a lot of good. If people would like to learn more or volunteer, they can contact me at s4np2020@gmail.com, or visit our website at www.s4np.org. **PSJ**

"There are too many people being injured and too many people dying on the job doing volunteer work."



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