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Proper Lifting & Ergonomics

Sarah, the parish office manager, had nearly tripped several times over a box of copy paper someone had left on the floor in the supply room. To prevent her coworkers from becoming injured, she decided to pick the box up, intending to place it up on a nearby counter top. She bent over, lifted the box, and began moving it to the counter. As she turned to place the box on the counter, she felt a pop followed by extreme pain in her lower back. She let out a scream and fell to her knees.

Fortunately, the pastor was nearby and came to her aid. Sarah could not move. The paramedics were called and Sarah was taken to the emergency room. The injury resulted in Sarah being unable to work for six weeks while she recovered.

Strains and injuries are not limited to those who do heavy labor. Hundreds if not thousands of injuries happen in parishes

across the country every day. Many of these injuries are similar to Sarah's; they happen quickly and are immediately noticeable. Others, however, happen over a period of time. What we do know is that these injuries can cost both the parish and individuals time and money. Occasionally, these injuries are unavoidable, but most can be prevented. The need for proactive training cannot be overstated.

Lifting

In a period of only five years, the number of diocesan claims from lifting injuries has reached more than 1,465, with expenses surpassing \$14,003,041. These types of injuries are painful and costly, but are also preventable. A quick search on the internet will provide hundreds of web sites and information about how to lift properly. Though there may be some slight variations, most experts agree on the following proper lifting techniques:

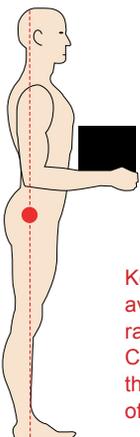
1. **Focus on the task: test, plan, path.**
2. **Move in close to the load.**
3. **Bend at your knees—not at your waist.**
4. **Tense stomach muscles, keep your back straight, and avoid unnecessary twisting.**
5. **Hold the load close to your body.**
6. **Grip the load firmly using your palms.**
7. **Gently lift the material using the**

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strength of your legs, and not your back.

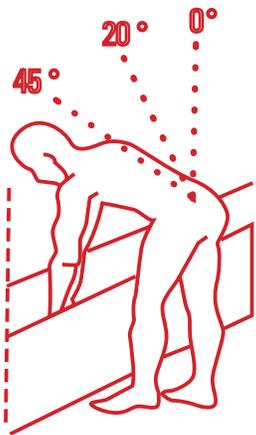
8. **As you lift, control the speed and force of the lift.**
9. **Turn with your feet and don't twist your body.**
10. **If the material weighs more than 40-45 pounds, do not lift it. Use a mechanical aid such as a dolly or "team lift" with someone who is of equal strength.**

Safe lifting practices often include discussion on the topic of back belts. The pros and cons of back belts continue to be a widely debated topic among safety professionals. Many have concluded that back supports are most effective when used with an overall back injury prevention program. It is important to remember that back supports will not prevent back injuries if proper lifting techniques are not used and may give the user a false sense of security. However, when used correctly, back belts provide support to the lower back and help to prevent bending at the waist when lifting an object.



Keep box close to your body and avoid reaching beyond the 10-inch range while lowering the box. Carrying a box away from the body can increase the amount of stress on the lower back.

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Avoid excessive bending (more than 45°).

Ensuring that safe lifting practices are used in the parish setting can be accomplished by training employees and volunteers, and helping them know their physical limitations. Not only should proper lifting guidelines be posted, but employees and volunteers should be required to follow them. Oftentimes, a person who is either out of shape or older, will try to do something that they used to be able to do, only to find out after injuring themselves, that they are no longer able to do this.

Designating a healthy, trained employee to do heavy lifting not only helps to prevent injuries, but is also a great way to practice mercy.

Office Ergonomics

In addition to the injuries that result from unsafe lifting practices, injuries can also occur as a result of improper ergonomic conditions within the workplace; in particular, office workstations. Office workstations present a number of risk factors to employees that can easily be corrected. Repetitive motion injuries from using the keyboard and mouse, eye strain due to poor lighting and muscular stress from improper posture at the workstation are just a few of these risks. In fact, repetitive motion injuries have accounted for more than \$3,615,069 in claims expenses that could have been prevented.

The solution to office workstation ergonomic issues is to conduct an Ergonomic Evaluation of each workstation. This evaluation targets the areas of the workstation that could present physical

problems to employee and evaluates the workstation in relationship to the employee who utilizes that space. The risk factors examined include:

- **Desktop organization:**

Frequently used items should be placed within the employee's normal reach area. This includes placement of the telephone, pens and pencils, stapler, paperclips, paperwork, etc. A well-organized desktop reduces the risk of injuries due to twisting and turning.

- **The height of the desk and chair:**

Proper posture while sitting creates a neutral body position, which removes unnecessary stress from the body. Make sure the chair height is set so the feet rest firmly on the floor or on a footrest. The employee's thighs should also form a right angle to their shins while sitting. At the same time, the seat of the chair should be high enough in relation to the work surface so that the forearms can be positioned at a right angle to the upper arms.

- **Lighting:**

Be sure that there is enough lighting present to prevent eye strain. Also check to make sure the lighting does not produce a glare on the computer screen, which can also result in unnecessary eye strain.

- **Placement of the keyboard:**

Position the keyboard close enough to the body so that the employee's fingers can easily reach the home keys of ASD and F on the left, and JKL semicolon on the right. Keep in mind that all of this should be done while maintaining a neutral or stress-free position with the arms. In addition, consider using a wrist rest. This is a support device with rounded edges and a comfortable cushion. It provides support to the wrists in a comfortable, neutral position and reduces pressure on the median nerve of the wrist.

- **Mouse location:**

The mouse should be a comfortable distance from the keyboard so that the employee does not have to reach for it.

- **Height and level of computer screen:**

A bad viewing angle or having the eyes too close or too far from the screen can lead to eye and neck strain. Place the monitor 20-40 inches away from the eyes, and position it

so that the employee's eyes look down at a 15 to 20 degree angle.

- **Document holders:**

Keep the document holder on the side of the computer corresponding to the employee's dominant eye. This helps to eliminate back and forth neck motions that can cause fatigue and pain in the shoulders and neck. It also reduces eye strain by avoiding constant refocusing.

After the evaluation is completed, employees and volunteers should be encouraged to plan out their work area and the work that will be done. In addition, consideration should also be given to pacing their workload. Employees and volunteers should rotate tasks so the same work is not done continuously for long periods of time. In addition, relaxation techniques such as stretching should be taught and encouraged, along with adequate breaks.

If an employee or volunteer experiences pain or a strain, they should report their condition immediately. If the condition persists, they should see a doctor. Addressing these issues early can prevent long-term damage.

Conclusion

Parish employees and volunteers should be protected and provided the best environment possible for their mission. Training, planning, communication and supervision should all be a part of the service environment. It is important for parish leaders to take the time and energy necessary to providing a safe, healthy and happy work environment. Everyone involved will benefit from such a proactive approach to ministry protection.

