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A New Mexico Workers' Compensation System Success Story

By Aileen O’Catherine

Nowhere is the impact of the workers’ compensation system better demonstrated than with an injured worker. When Sarah,* a young twenty-something dancer was injured while on the job, she found that something she knew nothing about, workers’ compensation, would have a positive impact on her life.

Dance teacher Sarah knew nothing about workers’ compensation until one day on the job, she injured her foot. Working 38 hours a week for a dance institute, Sarah discovered that what she thought would be time off with no pay while her injury healed was happily time off with pay, and that her injury would have a chance to properly heal with great medical care—because her employer carries workers’ compensation insurance.

At an Albuquerque elementary school where she taught in an after-school program, Sarah was demonstrating a move to the children. She jumped up, reached her arms in the air, and when she landed, injured her foot. “It was an overuse injury,” Sarah said, having had injuries as a dancer before. “My foot popped, and that was it.”

The torn tendon in the arch of her right

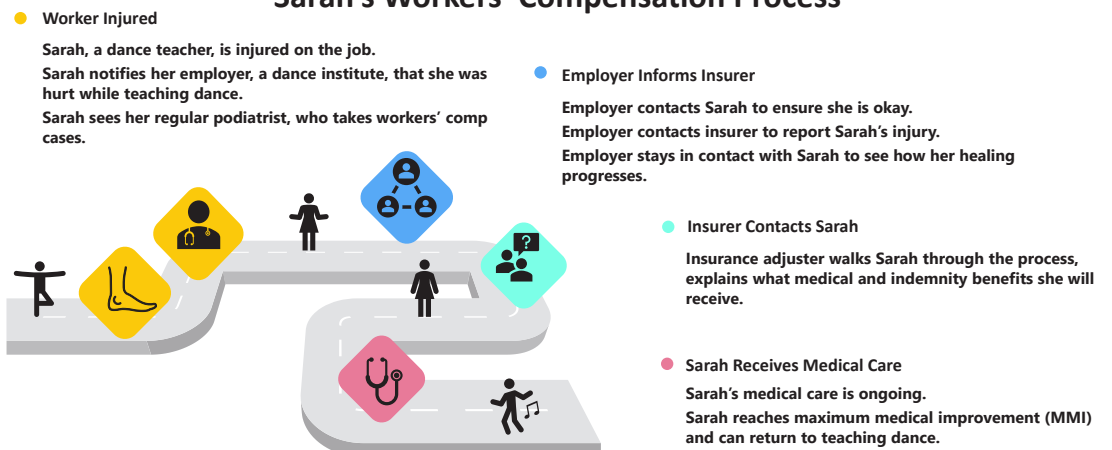
foot meant time off from work, substitute dancers to teach her classes, and for the WCA, the entry of another injury into the *Sprains, Strains or Tears* category of workers’ compensation data.

Sarah called her supervisor, who told her they would find a substitute for her classes. She then got a call from the employer’s after-school program director, who asked her to explain her injury to him: what happened, when it happened, where it happened, either at the dance institute or at a school. “I told him it doesn’t really matter, I just got injured,” Sarah said. “But then he explained to me that he wanted to see if he could continue paying me while I was out injured.” That was Sarah’s first surprise.

Sarah went to her regular podiatrist, who she was relieved to learn took workers’ compensation cases. Her employer asked her if she wanted to keep this doctor or use the one they chose, and Sarah decided to stay with hers, who knew her history of injuries. About a week later, she got a call from one of the dance institute’s directors, who told her he had seen her doctor’s report, and wanted her to know

*Name changed for privacy Continued on page 3

Sarah’s Workers’ Compensation Process



NMWCA Employee and Bureau of the Year Announced at Agency's Annual "All Hands" Event

By Aileen O'Catherine

The New Mexico Workers' Compensation Administration (WCA) held its annual "All Hands" staff development and employee recognition event on November 18, 2020. The virtual meeting included staff from the Albuquerque office as well as its six field offices.

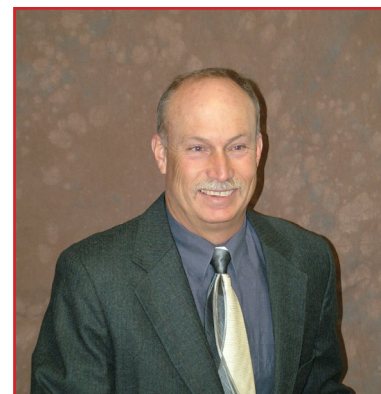
The annual meeting features the winners of the annual Employee of the Year and Bureau of the Year. WCA Director Loretta Lopez announced that Ombudsman Wayne Farmer of the Farmington field office was selected to receive the agency's "Employee of the Year" award. Farmer has been an ombudsman with the agency for 24 years. In presenting the award, Lopez said that Farmer exemplified professionalism and the kind of steady source of knowledge that is so integral to a complicated subject like workers' compensation. "We're very fortunate as an agency to have someone so knowledgeable on staff to answer questions. Wayne, this award is well-deserved," the director said. Ombudsmen provide confidential answers to questions from the public, the workers' compensation community, injured workers, and employers.

The Economic Research and Policy Bureau was named the agency's 2020

"Bureau of the Year." In presenting the award, Deputy Director Leigh Martinez said the bureau's staff provided support to the agency in a variety of ways, such as analyzing statistics for the annual report; organizing collection of data; assisting WCA bureaus; providing a quarterly management report, and interacting with other state agencies, such as the Department of Health. "This year's bureau of the year is one of the WCA's best examples of professionalism and dedication," Martinez said. "Their contributions are not always easy to see, but their work is included in projects prepared by senior management and other bureaus," she said.

The WCA also recognized several of its staff members for their years of service to the agency. Service award recipients include Sharron Johncox, 30 years; Annette Griego and Richard Villafuerte, 20 years; Charlene Cde Baca, 15 years; and Kyle Bowman, Leonard Fulton, Heather Jordan, Lydia Morrison, Aileen O'Catherine, Desirae Sanchez, Jessica Sanchez, and Donald St. Germain, for five years of service.

Although staff could not gather together, the agency challenged staff and/or bureaus to a pumpkin carving/ decorating contest, with the prize being the Director's Cup. The cup is an annual award given for the winner of a fun and informal competition. This year's winner was the Medical Cost Containment Bureau, for their Day of the Dead pumpkin. The virtual All Hands event was well attended.



Employee of the Year Wayne Farmer of the Farmington field office



Winner of the Director's Cup Pumpkin Carving Contest

NM Workers' Comp. Adm. Quarterly Bulletin

Loretta Lopez, Director
Diana Sandoval-Tapia, Public Information Officer
Aileen O'Catherine, Public Relations Specialist

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Suggestions for articles are welcome. Call Diana Sandoval-Tapia at (505) 841-6052.

Recent issues of the Quarterly Bulletin can be viewed on the Internet at <https://workerscomp>.

What is the Advisory Council?

The Advisory Council on Workers' Compensation and Occupational Disease Disablement is a task force created by statute, comprised of six members, three representing workers and three representing employers. The primary role of the Council is to advise the governor and legislature on the status of the workers' compensation system in New Mexico. The Advisory Council is required to meet at least twice annually. Scheduled meetings of the Council are announced on the WCA website, <https://www.workerscomp.nm.gov/Advisory-Council>.

Workers' Compensation Success Story (cont'd.)

Continued from page 1

that she would be compensated for her missed work. "I didn't even think that could happen," Sarah said, who knew nothing about workers' compensation. "I said, really? There's a way for me to get paid while I'm injured? It blew my mind."

An adjuster from the employer's insurer then called Sarah and explained how to fill out the insurance paperwork. Sarah told the adjuster what her rate of pay was, the hours she worked, and what the injury was. Then the adjuster roughly calculated what Sarah would receive in biweekly indemnity benefits to make up for lost time at work. Her adjuster also carefully explained the workers' compensation insurance process in terms Sarah immediately understood.

Along with her adjuster, the insurer provided Sarah with a nurse case manager (NCM). "She went to every single doctor's visit with me," Sarah said. The NCM helped with paperwork, and Sarah informed her if she wasn't able to make a doctor's appointment, and why. They communicated regularly. More than anything, the NCM was "my advocate to get the best health care I needed," Sarah said. "She would explain things to me, explained my MRI to me, and said, if the injury was really bad, I could get surgery. But because of COVID-19, it didn't come to that."

Sarah found that after she reached maximum medical improvement (MMI), the time when she would normally be able to go back to work, she was unable

to do so. The coronavirus resulted in the closure of schools, and her after-school dance program was on hold. Sarah found she was out of work, but there was one benefit. Sarah had been scheduled for surgery, but with the extra time off, her foot was able to completely heal. Surgery wasn't needed after all.

"Because of the tear, my foot will never have the flexibility it used to, because of me having to compensate for it and the muscle tightening and my arch falling a bit," Sarah said. "But I can dance. That's what matters." When life becomes more normal and the dance institute once again starts its after-school programs, Sarah will be there, dancing and teaching, thanks to a great employer/insurer team.

WCA Conducts Holiday Food Drive as a Way to "Pay It Forward"

By Aileen O'Catherine

The WCA held its second annual holiday food drive to benefit the Roadrunner Food Bank (RRFB). WCA staff and the workers' compensation community of attorneys, adjusters, and others donated both non-perishable goods and funds to benefit those in need. The food drive ran from Nov. 2 to Nov. 20.

A core group of dedicated staff coordinated the effort. Led by Anita Mayberry in the Facilities Department, helping with the drive was her way of "paying forward" a good deed that someone had done for her. "I really enjoyed working on the food drive," Mayberry said. "We are so grateful that the WCA came through to make the drive very successful even during these trying times," she said.

In total, the WCA collected 305 lbs. of donated food, enough for 366 meals. The RRFB calculates each pound of donated food provides about 1.2 meals.

In 2019, 395 lbs. of food was donated, enough for 474 meals.

Still, the WCA was determined to outdo last year's efforts, despite the restrictions of the novel coronavirus. So this year, in addition to dropping off non-perishable goods, the WCA worked with the RRFB to set up a special link online where donors could give funds for the food drive in the agency's name. A total of \$604.15 was collected. According to the RRFB's calculations, each donated dollar provides up to five meals. The money donated this year will provide up to 3,021 meals for those in need. Counting up both the donations of non-perishable goods and donated dollars, the WCA's food drive effort garnered enough to feed hungry New Mexicans 3,387 meals.

Safety practices were put in place to mitigate any spread of COVID-19 during food drop-off. A special donation box was placed in the lobby



Food collected for 2020 Road Runner Food Bank Drive

of the Albuquerque office so drop off of non-perishable goods could remain contactless.

This winter season, it was especially important to remember those who might need food, as the pandemic created a great deal more food insecurity. The impact of COVID-19 in New Mexico shows one in three children is at risk of hunger, and one in five people overall.

Hobbs Field Office Manager Sharron Johncox Retires After Serving New Mexico for 31 Years

By Aileen O’Catherine

When Sharron Johncox was hired as office manager for the WCA’s first field office in Lovington, it was 1989 and the office had only just opened. The New Mexico Workers’ Compensation Administration was just three years old, and was under what was then called the New Mexico Department of Labor (DOL), which is now called the Department of Workforce Solutions. (The agency was under DOL until the Legislature made the WCA independent in 1990).

When the state legislature tasked the WCA to open field offices throughout New Mexico, State Senator Billy McKibben of Lovington ensured the agency’s first field office opened in his hometown, bringing jobs to the southeastern part of the state. The opening happened so fast that the office was located in the only space available, a crowded room in the basement of the Lovington Courthouse. At one point, there were as many as nine employees in its limited space. “We were on top of each other,” laughed Johncox. “They had to find us another building, and that’s how we ended up in the old Lovington library.” But because the library required renovation, the move to that space didn’t occur until 1992. Court hearings took place in the basement room, along with daily office business.

Although Hobbs has a larger population than Lovington, Johncox suspects the office wasn’t located there because of Senator McKibben and his power to persuade. “The community was crazy about him,” Johncox recalls. They were also crazy about then-WCA Director Gerald Stuyvesant. “When he would come down to Lea County, it was like the president was here. Employers loved him and Deputy Director Toby Wright,” she said. It was Wright who interviewed and hired Johncox for her position with the agency.

From 1989 to 2017, she commuted the twenty-five minute drive from her home in Hobbs to the office in Lovington. It was a welcome change to have the field office in Hobbs. “Hobbs is the heart of the community for Lea County,” Johncox said. She oversaw the office’s relocation to Hobbs in 2017.

“Sharron has been the backbone of the southeastern field office,” said Field Office Manager Peggy Tafoya. “It’s been a pleasure to work with her all these years. She’s the consummate professional.”

In the past year, after reaching her 30-year mark with the agency, Johncox started to consider retirement so she could spend more time with her family. She has two daughters and a son, as well as five grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. With family in Fort Worth, Midland and Hobbs, she will now have lots of time to travel for visits. Living in a rural area, she is used to spending a lot of time getting from one place to another, so won’t mind the drives. “It’s not a big deal to drive 1.5 hours to Midland for dinner or shopping,” she said.

Spending 31 years with the WCA has been a rewarding experience for Johncox. “The New Mexico Workers’ Compensation Administration is truly concerned for the stakeholders of the system, changing when needed and growing,” Johncox said. “Throughout the years I’ve seen how the workers’ compensation system in New Mexico has continually improved,” she said.



Sharron (Peacock) Johncox with then-WCA Director Gerald Stuyvesant



Hobbs Field Office Manager Sharron Johncox

Charlene Roberts, office manager for the Farmington field office, said of Johncox, “We have worked together for over 29 years and she is always pleasant and ready to learn something new. They do not make employees like Sharron anymore. She is one of a kind.”

The Detroit, Michigan native has spent most of her life in southeastern New Mexico, and has no immediate plans to leave. Hobbs is her community, and she expects to devote more time to it in retirement. Johncox’s last day with the agency was December 31.



Lovington Field Office in its second location, 1992-2017

Economic Research and Policy Bureau Chief Appointed to Two IAIABC Committees

By Aileen O’Catherine

Richard Adu-Asamoah, PhD, Chief of the WCA’s Economic Research & Policy Bureau, has been re-appointed to the International Association of Industrial Accident Boards and Commissions (IAIABC) Regulation Committee, a position he has held since 2019, and to the Research and Standards Committee, a position he has held since 2013. Appointments are made on an annual basis, and may be renewed, beginning January 1 of each year.

The IAIABC is an association of workers’ compensation jurisdictional agencies and private organizations from

around the world that deliver workers’ compensation benefits and services. The IAIABC identifies and implements standards and best practices for the workers’ compensation industry.

The Regulation Committee focuses on the compliance and enforcement of workers’ compensation coverage. The Research and Standards Committee looks for comparable approaches to data from different jurisdictions to identify best practices, establish benchmarks, and compile information so jurisdictions are able to evaluate their systems in relation to others.

“I am pleased and excited about my 2021 appointments to the IAIABC committees,” said Adu-Asamoah. “My continuing appointments have introduced me to several innovative thinkers in workers’ compensation. For 2021, I am eager to share research and regulatory ideas and issues from New Mexico, while making an effort to learn from committee members from other jurisdictions.”

Adu-Asamoah has been with the WCA since June, 2011.

Sabrina Bludworth Named Employee of the Quarter

By Diana Sandoval-Tapia

The WCA announced Acting Executive Secretary Sabrina Bludworth as its Employee of the Quarter for the fourth quarter of 2020. The award recognizes agency employees who exemplify excellence in the workplace. Bludworth, who has been with the WCA since February 2012, reports to agency Director Loretta Lopez, and has always been willing to help in a variety of capacities, doing so with professionalism and discretion.

“Sabrina is a tremendous asset to the WCA,” said Deputy Director Leigh Martinez. “I’m grateful to have her on our team, and I’m happy that she is being recognized for her hard work and professionalism.”

Bludworth has been nominated for the award multiple times. She currently schedules and monitors Director’s hearings and has overseen the monitoring schedule for the agency’s Dispute Reso-

lution team, often monitoring for hearings and trials and other public meetings herself. She is often called upon to assist in a variety of areas when vacancies created an overflow of work.

“I’m honored to be selected as employee of the quarter,” Bludworth said. “I have enjoyed working at the WCA and my co-workers are a great group of people to work with.”

New Mexico Workers’ Compensation Administration Offices:

MAIN OFFICE

Location & Main Mail Address:

2410 Centre Ave. SE
Albuquerque, NM 87106-4190

Alternate Mailing Address:

PO Box 27198
Albuquerque, NM 87125-7198

Phone Numbers:

Phone: (505) 841-6000
In state toll-free phone:
1-800-255-7965
Fax Clerk of the Court:
(505) 841-6060
Director’s Fax: (505) 841-6009

Regional Offices

Farmington:

2700 Farmington Ave., Bldg.
E, Ste.2
Farmington, NM 87401
Phone: (505) 599-9746
In state toll-free phone:
1-800-568-7310
Fax: (505) 599-9753

Hobbs:

James M. Murray Building
2120 North Alto, Unit 3
Hobbs, NM 88240
Phone: (575) 397-3425
In state toll-free phone:
1-800-934-2450

Las Cruces:

2407 W. Picacho, Ste. D
Las Cruces, NM 88007
Phone: (575) 524-6246
In state toll-free phone:
1-800-870-6826
Fax: (575) 524-6249

Las Vegas:

32 NM 65
Las Vegas, NM 87701
Phone: (505) 454-9251
In state toll-free phone:
1-800-281-7889
Fax: (505) 454-9248

Roswell:

Penn Plaza Building
400 N. Pennsylvania Ave., Ste. 425
Roswell, NM 88201
Phone: (575) 623-3781
In state toll-free phone:
1-866-311-8587
Fax: (575) 623-0078

Santa Fe:

Aspen Plaza
1596 Pacheco, St. #202
Santa Fe, NM 87505
Phone: (505) 476-7381
Fax: (505) 476-7390

WCA Helpline-Hotline: (toll free in New Mexico)

1-866-WORKOMP 1-866-967-5667

WCA Website:

<https://workerscomp.nm.gov>