Blue Hat Program Takes Field Safety to Next Level

Alliant Energy and the IBEW assign field professionals to serve as safety ambassadors.

By Rick Irwin, Alliant Energy

When a fire blazes through a building, the safety leaders wear blue hard hats as a symbol of their leadership. Similarly, the union created a Blue Hat program for the utility industry as a way for field professionals to show their commitment to the safety of the field workforce.

Five Alliant Energy employees wear blue hard hats in the field. These leaders, who consider themselves one small spoke in the utility’s wheel of safety, have assisted in reducing the number of lost time injuries over the last year dramatically.

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 965 approached the company to start the program more than four years ago. The union and Alliant Energy then both compiled lists of possible job candidates, and if any names appeared on both lists, they were then asked to interview for the job position. Alliant Energy hired five Blue Hats to cover its service territory in Wisconsin, Iowa and southern Minnesota. The utility has two Blue Hats on its generation side to work with the area power plants and wind farms, and three Blue Hats to work on the energy-delivery side in both Iowa and Wisconsin.

While a few of the Blue Hats are trained as journeymen linemen and gas welders, their full responsibility is to the Blue Hat program. The Blue Hats’ mission is to perform crew visits, identify positive behaviors, promote a positive safety culture, discover safety rules that are not being followed, correct problems on site and then follow up with training as needed.

Surveying the Scene

While the Blue Hats are not required to wear blue hard hats all the time, they are still easily recognized by the line and gas crews as they approach the job site. When they come up onto a work area, they first visit with the crews, identify any hazards and then complete a tailboard form.

One of the Blue Hats said it’s always helpful to start out every meeting with the field crews on a personal note. With 50 crews to visit throughout his region, he has found that it works well to share a personal story, and then ask them about their families and outside interests. With this approach, he’s able to build trust with the linemen, who will then be more open to sharing their concerns about any problems in the field.

Because the Blue Hats often come from a field background, the line and gas employees are sometimes more willing to share their concerns with them, said Terry Harris, a Generation West Blue Hat.

“I think a lot of people in the field see it differently when we come out as opposed to someone from the safety department,” said Harris, who has been with the program for one year and with the company for 32 years. “Because we’ve been in the trade for a number of years, we fully understand what they are
saying, and many times, we have experienced the same thing
ourselves.”

Another key to the Blue Hat’s success with the field profes-
sionals is the fact that the program was rolled out at the same
time as the IBEW Code of Excellence in Alliant Energy’s ser-
vice territory. In some areas, however, it took time for the Blue
Hats to earn trust from the field crews. Over time, however,
they have seen the value in the program and have responded
favorably to it. Many of the linemen have found it unique that
the union has its personnel on the job site to work hand-in-
hand with members on safety.

Hazard Recognition

When the Blue Hats have visit job sites, they often notice a
variety of different infractions. For example, Terry Shannon,
who has been with the company for 34 years and started as a
Blue Hat in March 2009, said the No. 1 violation on a job site
is when linemen forget to test a line before they ground it.
In addition, Blue Hats have noticed that some of the linemen
may not adhere to the minimum approach distance or don’t
properly address traffic concerns by placing cones around
their trucks.

Another common area of concern is personal protective
equipment. The Blue Hats have seen linemen who weren’t
wearing safety glasses, ear plugs or steel-toed boots. To imme-
diately rectify that problem on site, the Blue Hats often stock
their trucks with hard hats, safety glasses and other supplies.

Alliant Energy has started a 100% fall protection program
when climbing, and as such, the Blue Hats also equip the line-
men with fall protection devices like the StopFall fall-restraint

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Blue Hat Rick Irwin helps train an employee on the company’s new 100% fall protection device. The Blue Hats also conducted pole-top rescue training with these new systems so their employees would know how to rescue a worker in the case of an emergency.
system from Miller Fall Protection, the BuckSqueeze from Buckingham Manufacturing and the Cynch Lok from DBI Sala. In addition, they provide fall-protection training on site if needed during their on-site visits.

Mitigating Problems

After identifying safety concerns in the field, the Blue Hats are responsible for resolving the situation. If they don’t have the necessary tools and equipment in their trucks to make the situation safe, then they will wait until they can bring in the proper product.

“We have the right and the obligation to shut a job down until we can get a situation corrected,” said Shannon. “I remember one time an employee called me in, and we had to stop the job until we could get a tester.”

In the event that a Blue Hat comes out frequently and a crew or individual is still violating safety rules, then he contacts the business agent and trainers. Alliant Energy first tries to rectify the situation through training sessions, and if that still doesn’t work, then the utility may use discipline measures after a certain number of infractions.

While the Blue Hats work side-by-side with Alliant Energy’s safety department, they report to the vice presidents of energy delivery and generation. In their weekly reports, they address concerns that they are seeing in the field, but they never divulge a name or a location. Instead, they describe general concerns such as the linemen aren’t wearing their high-visibility vests when working roadside or workers are neglecting to test their rubber gloves. They also report the positive behaviors they see in the field to the management.

Spreading the Message of Safety

Each of the Blue Hats is responsible for a different area of the service territory. They meet with linemen, gas crews, employees in the storeroom and workers in the garage facilities. In addition to working with field employees, the Blue Hats also have the jurisdiction to work with anyone in the company who isn’t following proper safety protocols. One example was a senior manager not stretching with his employees. In this situation, the Blue Hat closed the manager’s door and asked for the need for everyone, including managers, to stretch.

Every area of the company is open to the Blue Hats, and there are many diverse avenues they can take in terms of training and education. For example, Shannon often visits the training center to work with the apprentices. By impressing the importance of safe work habits on the apprentices from the very beginning, the Blue Hat helps to identify and correct problems before they evolve into poor and unsafe work habits.

“It’s always more effective to teach them safe work habits from the very beginning rather than waiting until they become journeymen,” Shannon said. “If they go back to their crews and don’t know the right way to do things, then they may be putting themselves in an unsafe situation.”

Blue Hat Terry Harris serves as a safety liaison between the staff at the plants and the upper level management. In this role, he has helped to develop a pre-job briefing form and mentored employees on proper personal protective equipment such as fire-retardant clothing or safety glasses.

Because he works with nine different plants, he is able to share successful strategies with plants in different locations. For example, he often takes digital photos of special tools, ergonomic work methods or any other best practices that improve safety. He then works to teams up the employees from two different Alliant Energy plants so they can work together to solve a common problem. For example, one plant had a lot of trouble with a cyclone boiler, and he found them a pneumatic tool to assist with deslagging the boiler.

“I am like the eyes and ears of the nine plants I work with,” Harris said. “I enjoy the opportunity to put two heads together from two different plants.
Facing the same problem. We all work for the same parent company, and it’s wonderful to be able to help each other make situations safer or come up with more ergonomic work methods.”

Making a Difference

Even though the Blue Hats all have a common goal, they rarely team up to do on-site job visits. Three or four times a year, however, they meet to discuss hazards in the field and ask each other for advice on how to handle a particular situation. They also talk via cell phone weekly.

Two-and-a-half years ago, the team identified more safety concerns than they’re seeing right now. Over the last year, the Blue Hats have noticed that the safety culture at Alliant Energy has improved tremendously. For example, the linemen are now stretching before they start work and throughout the day. They are also being more responsive when it comes to completing the job briefing form, wearing their correct personal protective equipment and reviewing their safety rule books.

Since the start of the Blue Hat program at Alliant Energy, the lines of communication are now more open than ever before, Harris said. “In the past, it was hard to enforce a rule if the workers didn’t understand it,” Harris said. “The biggest thing I’ve seen over the last few years is the awareness of safety that we are getting out there.”

Rick Irwin (rickirwin@alliantenergy.com) is the lead line technician for Alliant Energy in Verona, Wisconsin. He has been with the company for 32 years and has been in the Blue Hat position since January of 2009. He covers all of Wisconsin on the energy delivery side. He is the vice chair of the National Safety Council Labor Division, has attended OSHA’s 10-hour and 30-hour course, and has received hazard recognition training through the Wisconsin Safety Council. In addition, he serves as the president of IBEW Local 965.

Editor’s note: The other four Blue Hats are Terry Harris, a power plant electrician and the Generation West safety Blue Hat; Terry Shannon, a line mechanic and an Iowa Blue Hat; Michael Cichocki, a plant helper at Edgewater Generation Station who covers all of Alliant Energy’s generation plants in Wisconsin; and John Van Vante, a gas department foreman welder who works out of the Centerville, Iowa, office.

Companies mentioned:
Alliant Energy www.alliantenergy.com
Buckingham Manufacturing Co. Inc. www.buckinghammfg.com
DBI Sala www.dbisala-safety.com
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers www.ibew.org
Klein Tools www.kleintools.com
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