

Paoli Furniture Part of Elite Safety Program

One of only 55 Indiana companies to be VPP certified

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ORLEANS — Paoli Furniture, Orleans, joined the ranks Friday of few Indiana businesses to be accepted into the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Voluntary Protection Program.

A flag noting the company's distinction was presented during a celebration at the plant and attended by Paoli Furniture employees (referred to as members) and a number of guests. Various speakers participated in the ceremony, and many of them stressed reaching the VPP status would not have been possible without the dedication of the company's employees.

In presenting the VPP flag and certification, Lori Torres, commissioner of the Indiana Department of Labor, told the company's employees Paoli had become one of only 55 Indiana companies to be VPP certified, and she said there are more than 140,000 businesses in the state.

"Don't think this is lightly given," Torres said.

She stressed the value of continuing to maintain VPP safety and health standards by pointing out that one company had been forced to withdraw its status, removing it from the elite group.

Torres called Paoli's achievement a tremendous one, and said to the company's employees, "A program will never get approved without you and without the work you guys are doing here."

She also said, "Credit to you for having the enthusiasm, the incentive and the motivation to make this work."

OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program recognizes companies and workers in private industry who have implemented effective safety and health management systems and maintain injury and illness rates below national Bureau of Labor Statistics averages for their respective industries.

Jerry Roach, director of safety and environmental affairs at Paoli Furniture also cautioned the members that VPP status is not necessarily permanent.

"Today is not the ending of anything," Roach said. "It is actually the beginning. Our safety program here at Paoli is not perfect. We must strive for that."

He said workers, after having achieved the distinction, cannot allow themselves to become complacent. "The next thing you know, injuries start happening," Roach said.

Brandon Sieben, president of Paoli Furniture, said, "It is not an initiative. This is a culture. ... We have to continue to press on."

Mike McCracken, vice president of operations for Paoli Furniture, said, "This truly is an example of something that couldn't be done without every person's contributions and efforts."

A number of local elected officials also were invited to speak, including Orange County Commissioner Jim Springer. He said he had spent more than 40 years in the woodworking industry with 21 of the earliest ones having been with Paoli Furniture (which previously operated as Paoli Chair in Paoli).

"We congratulate you on the achievements that you have earned and worked so hard for," Springer said.

State Rep. Sandy Blanton, D-Orleans, said her husband, Larry (now the Orange Circuit Court judge) had once worked for the company. "Paoli has been providing employment to generations of people in Orange County," she said. "They have a long tradition of taking care of the employees in good times and in bad.

"The Paoli brand is recognized all across America. They're noted for quality, workmanship and perfection. And, now they're continuing to take care of their employees with a safety program."

Orleans Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Robert Henderson said, "We salute you. We're proud of you."

Orleans Town Council President Mike Fields directed his comments to the company's management and called for Paoli Furniture's continued presence in the community. "Orleans is open for business. Bring us all you want," Fields said.

In closing Friday's ceremonies, Dave Stagnolia, director of member and community relations for Paoli Furniture, said many of the members had ancestors who worked for the company. He noted the longevity that some current employees have with Paoli and urged them to look out for the safety of younger and incoming employees. "There are machines out there that bite," Stagnolia said. "Watch the generations that come. Help. It all starts with you and we have to continue that pattern."

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