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Al and Hansie Freebury have lived at Willamette Lutheran less than a year, and they noticed the emphasis on safety right away. "Both Al and I come from backgrounds where safety is important," says Hansie Freebury, who worked for Trinity County in California. "We have been very impressed with the attention to detail we have seen here."

"The staff has great morale," says Al Freebury, who worked for Lockheed Martin before he retired. "They are always cheerful, and they are very responsive. I hit a space between two pieces of carpet with my foot that was a risk for tripping, so I brought it to their attention. The next day, it was reconfigured. They encourage you to tell them about anything you see."

Willamette Lutheran Retirement Center has made zero injuries an important part of their culture. To make that happen, they need everyone's help: residents and employees.

"Long-term care workers tend to accept injury as part of the business," says Jacquie Strand, SAIF senior safety management consultant. "They often see zero injuries as not possible."

Deb Fell-Carlson, the previous senior safety management consultant working with Willamette Lutheran, has 30 years experience in nursing and nursing education, health care, and safety. She is familiar with the specific safety issues in long-term health care, and she is passionate about solving them.

"The problem in many health care facilities," she says, "is that safety is all about the patient — or the resident in this case. Safety plans are developed with the resident in mind, and the caregivers don't realize how important it is that they also take care of themselves. Part of the cultural shift that is needed is to help them realize that the resident is safer when the caregiver is safe. You can't separate the two."

A safer workplace didn't seem possible between 2001 and 2003, when the number of injuries at Willamette Lutheran — mostly strains, sprains, slips, and falls — were out of control. The company was in compliance and didn't seem to have serious hazards, but injuries continued to occur. Carrie Bochsler, director of human resources for Willamette Lutheran at the time, told Fell-Carlson how frustrating it was.

"She was doing all she could, but it didn't seem to make any difference," says Fell-Carlson, who began working with the management staff to identify ways to reduce injuries. "Raeann was committed to doing whatever was necessary to reverse the trend. She shared my concern that it was not a matter of compliance, but of culture and supervision."

Not long after that meeting, Fell-Carlson led an all-staff training on ergonomics and administered a questionnaire to assess several areas related to safety culture. She used the results of this survey to tailor training called the "SAIF Loss Control Approach" to the areas Willamette Lutheran had found most challenging.

"I delivered the training to the management team," she says, "and they ran with the concepts."

The "Tough Caring Contract," a tool presented in the training, was implemented; supervisory tools were developed; and hiring, orientation, and on-going training practices were redesigned. Guidelines were developed for lifting, and a special lift was purchased. The safety committee, made up of volunteers from every department, became more active and continues to meet once a month.

"After our training, Carrie created step-by-step training tools to use for each specific department," says Fell-Carlson. "Willamette Lutheran was successful because they had someone in Human Resources who supplied the boots on the ground, an administrator who encouraged her, and a board that was supportive. A supportive board is critical, and it is the piece that is often missing."

"I have great board support," says Raeann McDonald, the executive director. "They are concerned about the welfare of our residents, their families and visitors, and our staff. Quality of life and safety are our highest priorities."

"When I need a good example of a business that has done a great job, Willamette Lutheran is the one I use," says Strand.

SAIF's corporate vision is to make Oregon the safest place to work; helping employers keep their workers safe is what we do every day. When good safety practices improve the lives of other members of the community that's an added bonus. Willamette Lutheran has implemented a safety culture that has made their retirement community a safer place to live as well as a safer place to work.