

Most slip-and-fall injuries occur in winter; PERMA mobile unit aims for prevention

By Sara Foss
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Losing one's footing is the most frequent cause of injury reported to the Public Employer Risk Management Association (PERMA) by its members. The organization, which provides workers' compensation insurance and risk management to more than 600 public entities in New York State, has paid almost \$50 million over the past five years for claims from 4,439 incidents involving slips, trips and falls.

Sidewalks coated in black ice and greasy garage floors are among the culprits. PERMA recently acquired a new, mobile training center that replicates the risky real-world situations public employees might encounter on the job.

In November, PERMA brought its Mobile Safety Solutions Center to the transportation department at the Saratoga Springs City School District for a day-long training. Bus drivers and other employees strapped into a harness, donned cleats and practiced walking across slick glass tiles in a trailer-like structure. Throughout the process, an instructor advised them on how to walk across unsafe surfaces to avoid falling.

In the past, PERMA used educational videos and informational talks for training. The Mobile Safety Solutions Center is more engaging, more fun and more effective, according to Mary Beth Woods, PERMA's executive director.

"We're always trying to find ways to keep our members safe," Woods said. "The more visual and interactive, the more they remember."

The Mobile Safety Solutions Center was developed by Thurmon Lockhart, a professor at the School of Biological and Health Systems Engineering at Arizona State University. Research suggests it can reduce accident rates by 60% to 80%. Participants walk on tiles sprayed with a slippery mix of water and dishwashing liquid and wear harnesses to keep them upright should they lose footing.

The Saratoga Springs City School District's transportation department has about 90 employees; 70 are bus drivers. Many gamely volunteered to walk across the tiles in a harness while others watched their colleagues, cheering them on and occasionally breaking into applause. That's okay; research finds that even employees who simply observe the trainings experience a 30% reduction in injuries.

Bobby Yusko, assistant superintendent for business at the Saratoga Springs City School District, was among the participants. "The beauty of this training is you learn to be more aware of some of these things and how to respond with your body," he said.

Bus driver Melissa Parish initially struggled to navigate the tiles, but she



Bobby Yusko, assistant superintendent for business at the Saratoga Springs City School District, was among the participants in a slip-and-fall prevention training offered by PERMA. ❖ Photos by Al Marlin

gradually improved after listening to encouraging suggestions from PERMA trainer Peter Frisoni.

Frisoni's guidance emphasized standing up straight while walking. Many people tend to lean forward when they walk, which can lead to imbalance, he said.

He also advised taking small steps that land on a flat foot rather than the heel.

"What you want to do is the marching band step," Frisoni said. "It's one of the easiest things to do. You want to lift your knees, plant a solid foot down onto the ground. Face forward all the time, head up."

As Parish made her first tentative steps, Frisoni encouraged her. "Choppy little steps, lift the knees," he said. "Left,

right, left, right – you can do it. Keep going. You're doing it!"

"I've slipped and fallen before,"

Parish said, adding that she had never been seriously injured due to a fall. She praised the training, saying it would help her on the job. "It was fantastic," she said.

Frisoni and his fellow instructors incorporate obstacles into the training, such as a small flight of steps. Audience members threw small plastic balls at participants to challenge them, and participants sometimes carried cups of water across the tiles.

"Life is a distraction sometimes," Frisoni said.

Bus driver Dan Hinckley also underwent the training. He maintained a careful and steady pace and climbed over a small step while carrying a cup of water.

"I had a great time," he said. "If (the training) doesn't make you more aware of your surroundings, nothing will."

According to PERMA, January is the most common time of year for injuries caused by slips, trips and falls, but February has the most severe injuries related to falls.

PERMA is a member-owned, non-profit association of public entities providing risk management services and workers' compensation coverage through a group self-insurance program. It plans to conduct 20 training sessions in 2025 using the Mobile Safety Solutions Center, reaching an estimated 600 member employees.

Editor's Note: PERMA is a NYSSBA School Services Partner.