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Rail News: Short Lines & Regionals

Short Line Safety Institute seeks to increase railroad assessments, expand education and research efforts



Earlier this year, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and ASLRRRA President Linda Darr (side by side near photo's center) attended a short-line safety briefing that included the SLSI as a topic. Photo – ASLRRRA

By Jeff Stagl, Managing Editor

A pilot program is in the rearview mirror. So, the [Short Line Safety Institute](#) (SLSI) now is building speed as it heads toward a much-desired destination: safer work processes at regionals and short lines.

SLSI is charged with assessing a regional's or short line's safety culture and performance, identifying and addressing any gaps, and providing education, training and research assistance. The [American](#)

Short Line and Regional Railroad Association (ASLRRA) created the institute last year with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), Volpe National Transportation Systems Center and University of Connecticut.

SLSI initially is targeting assessments — which are conducted confidentially to protect a participant’s identity — at the more than 200 railroads that transport crude oil and other hazardous materials.

Institute leaders and staff aim to enhance or change approaches to work behaviors through voluntary partnerships with short lines to facilitate a best-possible safety culture, one that makes safety the top organizational priority.

The six assessments completed last year under the pilot phase helped SLSI staffers develop tools and processes for measuring and evaluating 10 core elements of a safety culture, including committed leadership, continuous learning and open communication. They also devised ways to share results with an assessed railroad’s managers and crafted a plan for ongoing education, training and research.

Through the six initial assessments and several others that have been conducted since the pilot ended, SLSI concluded that management must be visibly and consistently supportive of safety practices and the culture at their railroad.

In addition, the institute found that safety practices should match documented safety plans and reflect every-day operations; managers seek fresh ideas and training opportunities to help prompt employees to perform at a high level of safety; and positive recognition instead of punitive action helps build trust among workers and supervisors. “We are seeing a lot of commonalities,” says ASLRRA President Linda Darr.

Now, SLSI is working to perform more assessments and identify additional trends. The institute plans to complete a total of 14

assessments by year's end, then conduct another 10 or so in 2017. The number of assessors recently doubled to eight to handle a busier workload.

With the pace of assessments picking up, SLSI is gaining momentum, says Darr.

"It's starting to gel. We're seeing progress," she says.

That progress was apparent in mid-September when Darr attended ASLRRRA's Eastern Region meeting in Indianapolis and talked with several managers of assessed short lines.

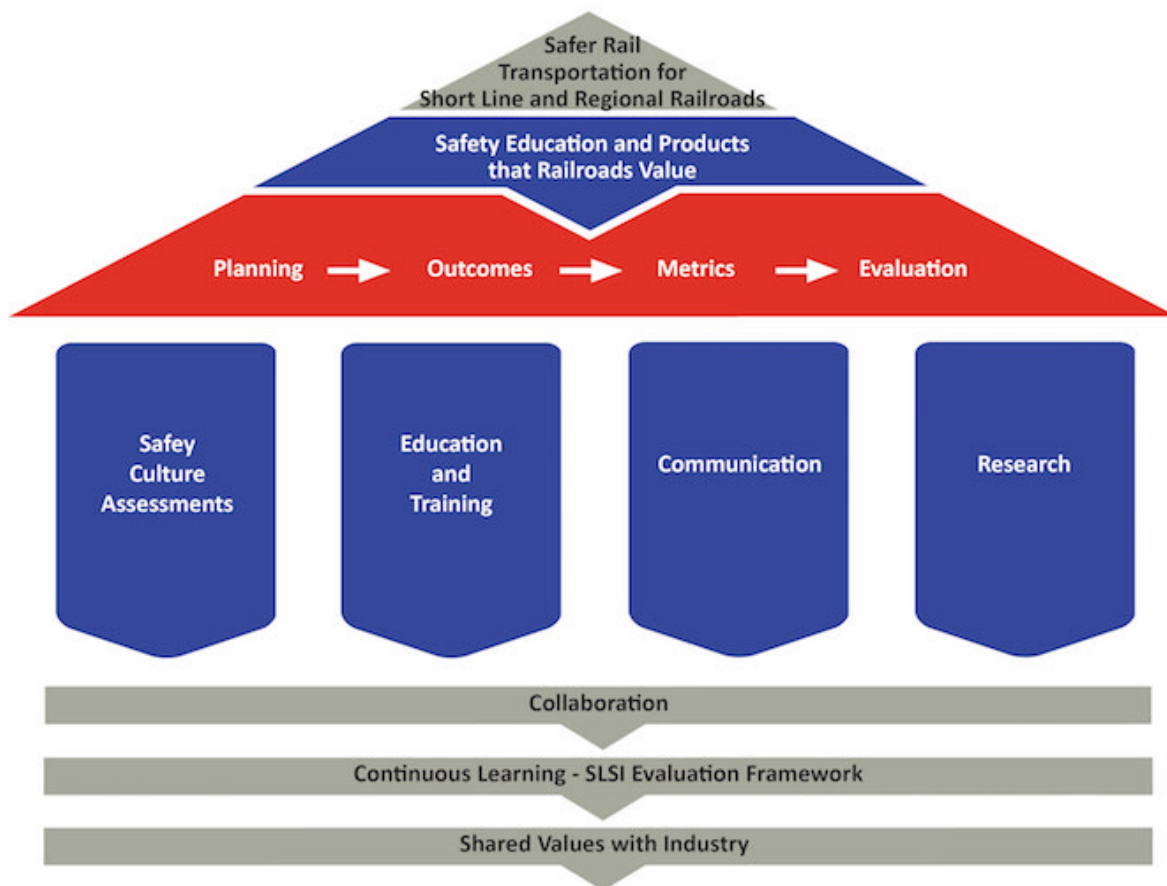
"They told me it opened their eyes and that they were reinvigorated with their safety culture," she says. "We got a lot of good feedback overall. We heard how helpful the process was."

Assessing the assessments

To get more regionals and short lines to buy into the institute's mission, the staff is trying to improve the quality of the assessment process, says SLSI Executive Director Ron Hynes.

An assessment — which typically takes three to five days to complete — involves a data-driven analysis of a participating railroad's safety culture to provide the institute with a better understanding of industry-wide approaches and improvement opportunities. Assessors are assigned in teams of two based on the number of employees at a railroad; less than 30, two assessors; between 30 and 150, four assessors; and 150 or more, six assessors.

Prior to the assessors' arrival, an anonymous survey is sent to the railroad's managers and employees. The assessment begins with a planning session attended by the railroad's senior managers and SLSI leaders and staff. Then, assessors observe operations and conduct interviews with the railroad's leaders, supervisors and employees according to a standardized protocol. **A graphic shows the intended**



effects of SLSI’s four pillars: assessments, education/training, communication and research. *Source: ASLRRRA*

An assessment tends to be more successful if both parties are willing partners, says Hynes.

“The assessments are an invitation into their businesses. It takes a commitment from them and from us,” says Hynes. “We take a look at the risks on the railroad and have a conversation. It’s not a one-and-done kind of situation. We want to determine how to maintain the culture going forward.”

The assessors and institute staff are experienced railroaders, with 20 to 40 years of service at various Class Is and short lines. The assessors try to be flexible when working with a railroad, says Hynes.

“Even if it means a 6 a.m. meeting because that’s the time the managers are available, the assessors will be there then,” he says.

Refresher course

They also will work over a weekend to write a final report immediately after an assessment. Through the pilot phase and shortly afterward, assessors had completed their work during weekdays, then went home and wrote the final report. But other priorities tended to pop up, causing distractions that sometimes delayed reports for months, says SLSI Senior Safety and Operations Manager Mike Long.

“Now, the entire team spends that Saturday and Sunday writing the report while it’s fresh in their minds, and gives it to the railroad by Monday,” he says. “Then it’s a timely assessment for the railroad.”

Several months after a final report is issued, the institute will follow up with the assessed railroad via a phone call or survey to gauge safety performance and whether any changes that were made remain in place. Reports issued so far have noted that many workers want to see their managers in a more positive light, says Long.

“It’s amazing how far a handshake or a pat on the back goes,” he says. “We also found that coaching is a widespread desire for employees. All too often, their only interaction with a manager is when they do efficiency testing.”

In addition, assessors have learned that some employees with less than five years of experience claim they work safe, but don’t always follow the safety rules.

“They say what they do is better than the rules. But all it takes is one time of not beating the odds,” says Long.

One other outgrowth from the assessments: discovering a process or approach that could serve as a benchmark for other regionals and short lines. For example, one assessed railroad provided its employees a free

“tailgate lunch” if they did a good job or performed something the right way, says Long. Such a reward could be replicated elsewhere, he believes.

Getting the word out about benchmarks and trends is part of SLSI’s internal and external communication efforts. Communication is one of the institute’s four foundational “pillars,” along with the assessments, education/training and research, says SLSI Programs Manager Michele Malski.

To reach out externally, the institute is developing a website and a social media presence, says Malski. SLSI has Facebook and Twitter accounts, and is developing a LinkedIn page.

In terms of education and training, the institute recently launched a webinar series on hazmat safety. Six free pre-recorded webinars focus on safety training, including ones pertaining to chloride and ammonia. The goal is to add two additional webinars per month, says Malski.

“We want to keep a webinar library to create a big repository of information,” she says.

SLSI also wants to establish itself as a short-line safety researcher. The institute aims to build on knowledge available about safety cultures in other industries as well as research conducted by the FRA, insurance companies, and railroads that have developed safety and behavioral-based education programs.

With research work just starting to ramp up, one target will be the trends that are identified via the assessments, says Malski.

In the meantime, SLSI also is exploring e-learning resources — such as tests or forums — and hands-on training opportunities. At the Eastern Region meeting in Indianapolis, ASLRRRA and SLSI held two new training sessions: one that involved attendees answering questions about safety via their smartphones and one that involved group

discussions about hypothetical safety situations. Similar sessions likely will be held at future regional meetings featuring different hypothetical scenarios.

ASLRRA members had expressed an interest in different-from-the-norm sessions at the meetings, says Malski.

“It gets people to participate and bring their own experiences to it, and gets them to think differently about safety,” she says. “It creates open and effective communication.”

An evolutionary process

That’s why the institute was created. And to keep it going, additional federal funding will be key, says Darr. Congress provided SLSI \$500,000 in fiscal-year 2015 to develop the pilot and \$1.9 million in FY2016 to continue enhancing the program.

The enhancements figure to keep coming, says Darr.

“The institute will evolve over time to help support the industry on the gaps that we find and on the hot issues of the day, like drug and alcohol testing,” she says.

Ultimately, SLSI strives to provide the industry a deeper understanding of the organizational, societal, economic and other factors that might impact safety performance and conformance at regionals and short lines.

“We want to become a risk-reduction source for railroads and help get the accident ratio down,” says Hynes