



HEADWAY

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The insight gained by sharing information and evaluating safety initiatives will help to further raise the performance of the natural gas industry as a whole

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BY CHRISTINA NYQUIST

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## BUILDING CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

In March, as part of their continuing Commitment to Enhancing Safety, the American Gas Association and its member companies successfully completed a groundbreaking, voluntary effort to advance the safety, reliability, and quality of natural gas delivery for customers and utility employees alike. Ten AGA member companies from throughout the United States and Canada volunteered to participate in a pilot peer-to-peer safety and operational practices review program, drawing on the experience and expertise of fellow natural gas operators to help the participating companies determine what is working well, as well as to identify opportunities for improvement. The insight gained by sharing information and leading practices and evaluating safety initiatives will help to further raise the performance of the natural gas industry as a whole and help continue the industry's record of safe, reliable delivery of natural gas to homes and businesses.

"Safety is the number one priority for America's natural gas utilities," said AGA Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Lori Traweek. "This pilot peer review program will provide considerable value as we continue to take action to further enhance the safety and reliability of our industry."

AGA Vice President of Operations and Engineering Christina Sames emphasized the collaborative nature of the program. "AGA member companies are fortunate to be able to draw from a tremendous network of knowledgeable and dedicated industry professionals," she said. "The pilot review leveraged that ability, allowing experienced, working professionals to heighten their understanding of how they and their peers can best advance the safety of their employees, customers, and communities."

The impetus for a pilot peer review program came as the result of a 2011 effort by the North American energy pipeline trade associations to analyze safety programs and information-sharing initiatives used in the aviation, chemical, firefighting, nuclear, rail, and trucking industries. AGA identified an opportunity to develop a peer-to-peer discussion program that would provide an effective venue for operators to discuss safety initiatives and identify leading practices and opportunities to enhance their performance. In early 2013, the AGA Board of Directors approved pilot testing of a peer review program.

Participating pilot companies were divided into peer groups based on the number of customers in their service territories.

From June 2013 through March 2014, teams of professionals from each of the participating companies, selected for their experience and leadership, visited the companies in their peer group to observe facilities and operations, and to interview employees and contractors throughout all sectors of the organization. Each review lasted four days, with teams delivering a comprehensive verbal report to company executive leadership on the closing day. The three review topics included: safety management systems, which explored overarching safety programs and culture; training and worker procedures, which delved into the systems in place to help ensure worker safety and training; and pipeline safety risk management, which reviewed the technical capabilities and mechanisms in place to monitor, maintain, and upgrade the utility's physical delivery infrastructure.

"The significant time and resources invested by each of the pilot participants is a testament to their commitment to the safety of the industry, their dedication to the success of the peer review pilot, and the value they believe the program can deliver," said Sames. "The nature of the program allowed participants to build a strong level of trust, which, in addition to their deep industry knowledge, led to an honest, open, and productive process. Executives and participants alike touted the success of the reviews and expressed a sincere belief that the findings would help improve operations."

In addition to offering immediate valuable insights that will serve to shape upcoming AGA initiatives and advance the entire natural gas industry, the experience granted participants the opportunity to form relationships with peers that will facilitate information sharing and trust across the industry. Reviewers benefited from the opportunity to learn from the programs they observed, gaining a deep understanding of fellow companies' practices that could guide their own efforts to enhance safety.

"As an industry, we are only as strong as each of our individual companies," said Sames. "This program will help build valuable connections between industry peers—lasting relationships that will encourage continued communication and learning, ultimately helping to ensure that local natural gas utilities throughout the nation can continue and enhance their record of excellent, safe, and reliable service." ♦

*Christina Nyquist is a communications specialist at AGA.*