SDRMA
SPECIAL DISTRICT RISK MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

2025 Innovation Award Program Submission

Coachella Valley Public Cemetery District

DESCRIBE THE RISK OR CONCERN

In 2023, the District had an employee "tweak" his back while lifting a headstone. This incident highlighted a long standing risk in our operations. For more than 90 years, headstones had been handled through a fully manual process. Vendors delivered stones to the maintenance yard on pallets, and District employees manually lifted each stone onto a service trailer, transported them to the gravesite, then manually lifted and placed them into the ground. Given the weight and awkward shape of headstones, this routine work created ongoing exposure to back injuries, strains, and other musculoskeletal harm for our staff. The District recognized that continuing this historic method was not acceptable from a safety and risk management standpoint, and that a new approach was needed to eliminate manual lifting and prevent future injuries.

DESCRIBE DETAILS OF THE PROCESS AND SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED:

After the 2023 injury, the District evaluated how headstones were being received, transported, and installed, with the goal of removing all manual lifting from the process. We designed and built (in-house) a winch controlled headstone lift system tailored to our service trailer and cemetery operations. Under the new method, headstones are delivered directly to the cemetery and placed by the vendor onto a special loading table. This table is designed to align with the District's lift trailer so stones can be safely secured and lifted using the winch system, then placed onto the trailer without any employee lifting. Once at the gravesite, the winch again lifts the headstone and allows precise placement into the intended space. The system was created to be practical for daily use by our crew, compatible with our existing equipment needs, and focused on eliminating the primary injury driver, which is manual handling of heavy headstones. This solution transformed a historically labor intensive task into a controlled mechanical process.

DESCRIBE THE RESULTS AND OUTCOMES OF THE INITIATIVE

Since implementing the winch controlled lift system in 2024, the District has eliminated manual headstone lifting by staff, making the installation process fully lift free for our service crew. Most importantly, we have had no workplace injury claims related to headstone lifting since the tool was put into service. The innovation has also proven valuable beyond our own operations. The design has been shared with cemeteries across the state, including through a presentation at the California Association of Public Cemeteries conference in 2024. We have hosted multiple cemetery districts onsite to demonstrate how the system works and to support them in adopting similar safety improvements. This initiative has reduced a key employee safety exposure, strengthened our risk management practices, and contributed a practical, replicable solution to the broader public cemetery district community.