UK researchers partner with Thoroughbred industry to address worker health
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Work-Life Columnist
October 10, 2012

Central Kentucky’s rolling bluegrass and iconic plank fences are synonymous with the Thoroughbred industry. Enter Lexington from almost any route, and you are greeted by the beautiful landscape and horses grazing within pristine fields.

But the Thoroughbred industry is more than just a grand entrance to our town. It is a fundamental part of the economy and culture in central Kentucky. According to the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission, in 2010, Kentucky’s Thoroughbred breeding industry created an estimated 17,600 Kentucky jobs, which amounted to more than $350 million in estimated total earnings.

There is one caveat to the industry’s glamour and serenity, one that is often widely accepted by those working in it: Working with horses, Thoroughbreds particularly, is a dangerous business.

Ask anyone who grew up with horses and they’ll nod and swap tales of a near-miss kick or the time they fell and broke a rib or an arm. While such events can become exchangeable war stories down the road, they are scary at the time and can lead to serious personal hardship. In addition, especially if you are in the business of horses, they can be expensive.

Thoroughbred farm owners know this. They know it through their own experiences, but also through the experience of lost work time, workers’ compensation expenses, health care claims, medical bills and other costs related to worker illness and injury. Each farm is different and may have few resources available to overcome the risks associated with the work. They may also have the same limitations in assessing patterns in injuries and the associated costs.

“We know that working with Thoroughbreds is dangerous, and we do all that we can to reduce the risk for our workers as we do for ourselves, but the industry is mostly comprised of small farms that have limited resources,” said Scott Mallory, president of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Farm Managers’ Club and advisory board member of the study. “We can talk to other farm managers about what their problems have been, but we don’t have a birds-eye view on the industry as a whole. Any help we can receive in looking at the patterns and making recommendations is welcome.”

This is where a new study enters. The Thoroughbred Worker Health and Safety Study is a five-year study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the University of Kentucky Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention. The study is led by Jennifer Swanberg, professor of social work and executive director of the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin) at the University of Kentucky.

The goal of the study is to make work safer for workers on Thoroughbred farms. Over the next four years, Swanberg and her team will strive to better understand the circumstances associated with common and uncommon illness and injuries experienced by workers through the project’s three phases. Phase one will consist of in-depth interviews with farm owners, managers and/or human resource personnel. Phase two calls for community-based interviews with Thoroughbred workers. Finally, phase three entails the development and evaluation of worker-safety resources to be distributed to owners, managers and workers on Thoroughbred farms in Kentucky.
“We are committed to this project serving the Thoroughbred industry and the community,” said Swanberg. “We really want to understand the circumstances that may lead to increased risk of illness and injury on farms in order to create user-friendly strategies that can help reduce the illness and injury burden on the individual and on the farm. We think the best way of doing this is to fully engage the industry and the community in the project. They know their needs better than anyone.”

To ensure that the Thoroughbred Worker Health and Safety Study meets the needs of both the workforce and employers, it is being guided by two advisory councils: a community advisory board comprised of community service and health leaders, and an industry advisory board that includes leaders from Kentucky’s Thoroughbred industry.

One such member is David Switzer, executive director of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association and Kentucky Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders, who believes that the study has the potential to help the industry.

“Our organization represents a community of employers in the state of Kentucky with workforce challenges like any other,” said Switzer. “We are excited about research that can help offer solutions to some of these challenges while improving safety conditions for our workforce.”

Phase one of the project will begin in October 2012 and extend through June 2013. It will consist of in-depth interviews with farm owners, managers, and human resource personnel. The research team will be reaching out to Thoroughbred farms of all sizes to invite them to participate. Anyone with questions about the study is encouraged to contact me, Jess Miller Clouser, at thoroughbred@uky.edu or at (859)323-0587.

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