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SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 2015

ACCIDENTS OR ABUSE?

A look at injury, illness records for public workers in the region

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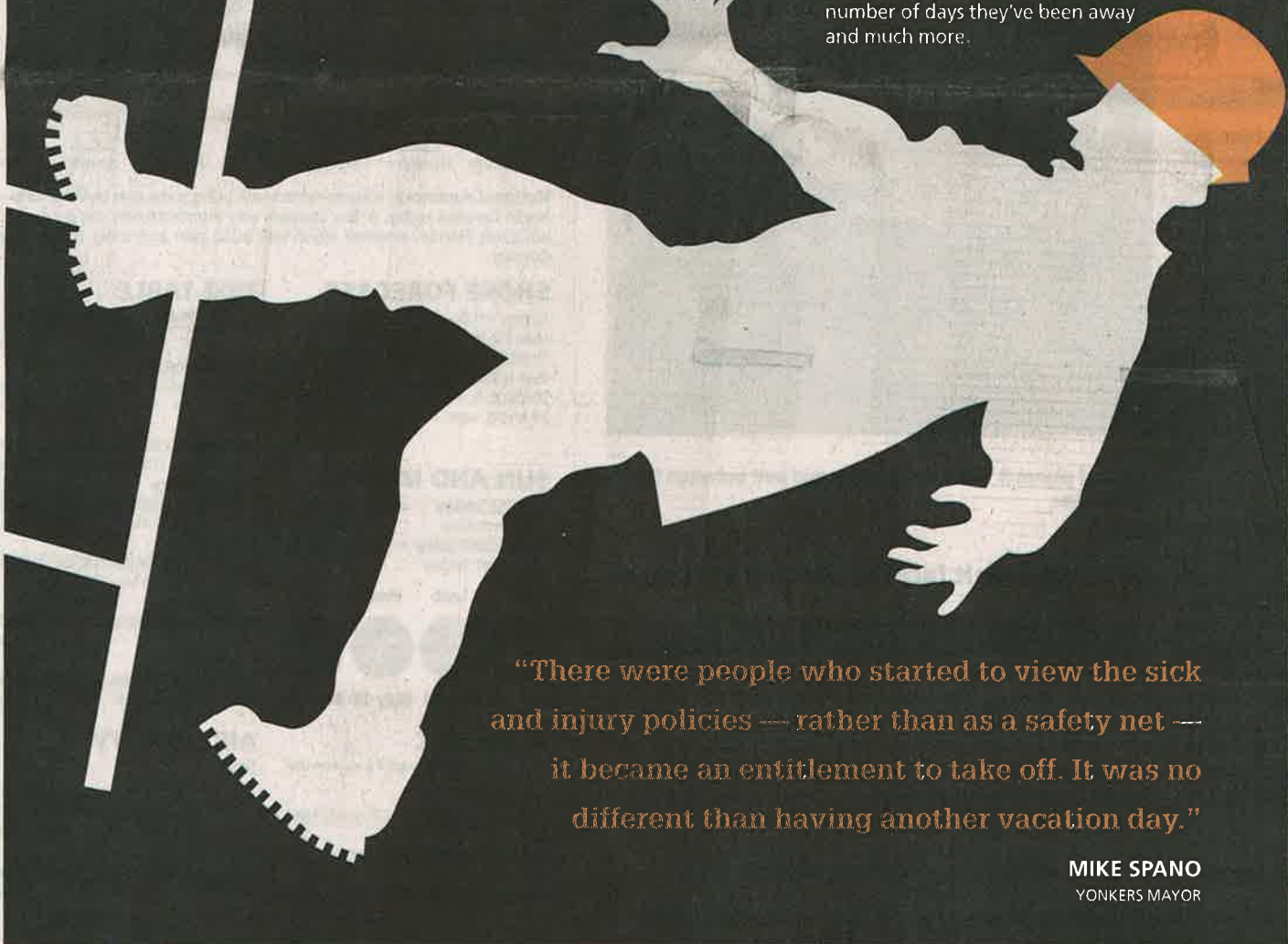
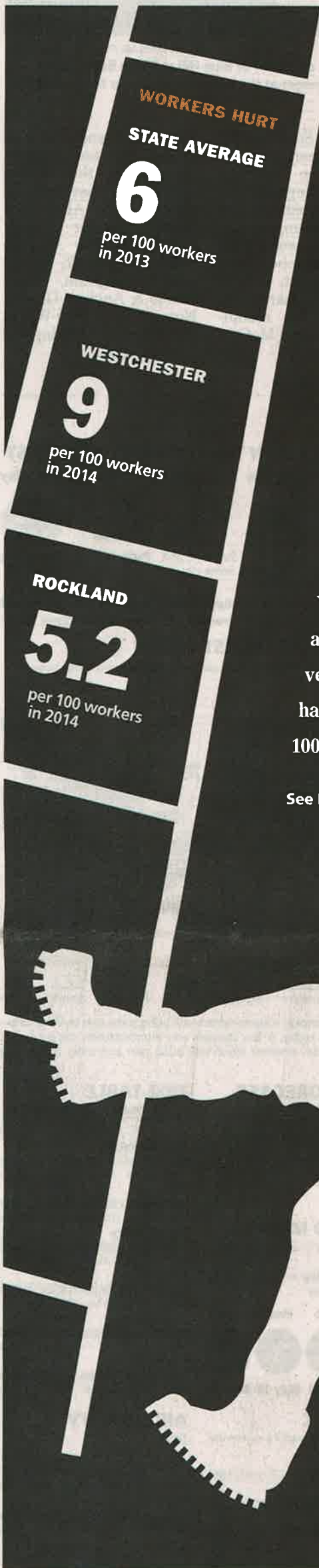
Yonkers workers topped the list of public-employee job injuries last year. ♦ The region's biggest city had 22.7 injuries per 100 workers — more than three times the state average — though Yonkers was just one of the most extreme local examples. ♦ An analysis of local governments' work-related injuries in 2014 revealed that a majority of the Lower Hudson Valley's communities have public worker accidents well above the state average of 6 per 100 workers in 2013, the most recent state figure.

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Visit nydatabases.com to see data gathered from municipalities in the Lower Hudson Valley on the number of government employees who have been injured on the job, the number of days they've been away and much more.

"There were people who started to view the sick and injury policies — rather than as a safety net — it became an entitlement to take off. It was no different than having another vacation day."

MIKE SPANO
YONKERS MAYOR



Injuries

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Local governments keep logs that describe the nature of every work-related injury or illness. A review of redacted county government injury logs showed that the accidents ranged from slipping on ice to strained backs for public works staffers to a broken jaw for a corrections officer punched by a county jail inmate.

One of last year's most serious injuries was to a Rockland County sheriff's mounted officer who fell backward off a horse when it reared, causing him to miss 238 days of work. In another case, a Yonkers police officer was seriously injured during a narcotics investigation when he was struck by a vehicle.

Last year's injuries were also psychological. A Westchester County corrections worker in the women's unit missed 17 days of work because of stress, after being asked to write a report. A Rockland County corrections officer took 11 days off after an inmate suicide.

There were no fatal work-related injuries or illnesses last year, though Peekskill Firefighter Kevin Bristol became ill at a house fire on March 3 and was found dead at his home later of cardiac arrest.

Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano noticed a high injury rate when he took office in 2012 and said it was partly due to abuse.

"There were people who started to view the sick and injury policies — rather than as a safety net — it became an entitlement to take off. It was no different than having another vacation day," Spano said.

He said 40 police officers were on sick or injury leave when he took office and now only 10 are.

"We are pushing very hard to make sure those who are injured get the help they need and ensure those who abuse the system aren't able to do so," he said. "It's been really hard, though. The numbers are pretty clear."

The Bureau of Labor Statistics hasn't yet calculated New York's local-government work-related injury figures for 2014, but in 2013 it recorded six work-related injuries for every 100 workers. Since 2003 New York's local-government rate of injury per 100 workers has ranged from six to nearly nine and the rate has been falling since 2006, it says.

State law requires local governments to publicly post summaries of their work-related injuries and illnesses between Feb. 1 and April 30. Local officials fill out a state form or one generated by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Even off the streets, public employees face dangers.

Last year a Rockland County corrections sergeant's firearm got caught in clothing and discharged twice, with one bullet passing through his thigh. He was out 44 days.



JOE LARESE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Rockland County Highway employees Jim Stokes, Scott June and Steven Ladolcetta work on truck maintenance at the department's yard in New City.

Missing information

Around Jan. 15 The Journal News filed Freedom of Information Law requests with all municipalities in Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties. The newspaper requested copies of the 2014 Summary of Work-Related Injuries and Illnesses Form SH-900.1.

Four communities did not release data despite repeated inquiries over more than two months: Mount Vernon, North Salem, Nyack and Sleepy Hollow.

The town of Harrison was the only government to deny the request, citing an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy and an inter-agency exemption.

The Journal News appealed Harrison's decision by noting that the data sought was purely statistical with no personally identifying information. The newspaper noted that state labor law Part 801.32(a)(4) requires local governments to publicly post their annual summaries between Feb. 1 and April 30; Harrison did not respond to the appeal.

Most municipalities sent Form SH-900.1, others sent a similar form by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration called Form 300A. A few governments sent their work injury logs that detail every injury.

Three communities with fewer than 10 employees were not included in the survey: New Square, Pomona and Wesley Hills.

WESTCHESTER

Municipality	Avg # employees	# Days Away From Work	Injuries	Injuries per 100 workers
Yonkers	3686	7732	838	22.7
Irvington	135	3	29	21.5
Tarrytown	136	349	26	19.1
Cortlandt	216	453	41	19
Rye Brook	103	32	17	16.5
New Rochelle	689	3930	106	15.2
Rye	240.5	328	36	15
Mount Kisco	160	313	24	15
Greenburgh	755.5	733.5	111	14.7
Mamaroneck village	133	692	18	13.5
Scarsdale	400	453	52	13
Buchanan	47	3	6	12.8
Mamaroneck town	266	278	32	12
Peekskill	230	877	27	11.7
Croton	131	565	15	11.5
Ossining town & village	65	83	7	10.8
North Castle	149	82	15	10.1
Port Chester	328	121	33	10.1
Ardsley	80	35	8	10
Briarcliff Manor	142	231	14	9.9
Larchmont	140	317	13	9.3
Yorktown	360	409	33	9.2
Westchester County	3826	6653	346	9
Eastchester	269	504	23	8.6
Tuckahoe	70	136	6	8.6

Data request

The Journal News obtained copies of the posted forms and other data on work-related injuries and illnesses through Freedom of Information Law requests filed in January with 74 village, town, city and county governments in Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties.

There are many reasons why municipalities in the Lower Hudson Valley might have higher injury rates.

Local governments might use their own public works employees to collect garbage while others contract the job to private companies. Some communities may not have their own police or fire departments, two job sectors that typically have the highest numbers of injuries, outside of public works.

Size matters, too, when it comes to injury rates.

Governments with small workforces can quickly rack up rates higher than the state average with just a few injuries, as was the case with West Haverstraw's five injuries among its 21 employees. Those five injuries gave the village the highest injury rate in the region.

At the other end of the spectrum, Rockland County logged a rate lower than the state average: 5.2 for every 100 workers. County Highway Superintendent Charles "Skip" Vezzetti had seven injuries in his department, one of the county's more dangerous departments because of road work, excavation and tree trimming.

Vezzetti, who has had five or six workers hit by cars over the years, said chainsaw training, worker tailgate sessions and new equipment have helped his department reduce accidents.

"We saw that we were having a number of back injuries, so we installed little cranes on the back of our mason crew trucks," said Vezzetti, whose trucks now also have fold-down sides that allow workers to slide items off a flatbed instead of lifting.

Maintenance worker Joe Cavati has worked in Rockland's Highway Department for 14 years and has never been injured. Cavati said distraction is the biggest safety threat.

"Between the traffic and working out on the road with the crew, you have to be alert," he said. "If you're not alert, that's how you get injuries."

Vezzetti said he lowered his department's accident rate by half in the past 15 years. Besides offering training and safety gear, he's scrutinized accident claims.

"Ninety percent of our employees are great employees, but when you get five or ten percent of them who are consistently out on Workers Compensation, we look for patterns," he said, adding that the county's Return To Work program

Common injuries

Some of the most common injuries for public workers last year were to the lower back, shoulders, knees and hands. The following incidents are excerpts from the municipal injury logs.

Jan. 3, 2014: South Nyack police officer slipped on icy pavement, bruised right elbow and shoulder; no missed days of work.

Jan. 13, 2014: Rye sanitation worker injured right shoulder picking up recycling, causing 135 days of missed work.

Feb. 6, 2014: Putnam County Office for the Aging kitchen worker cut top end of middle left finger while slicing butter, causing one day of missed work.

Feb. 18, 2014: Mount Kisco laborer hit right knee on barricade while on back of garbage truck, causing 34 days of missed work.

March 1, 2014: Westchester County corrections officer injured right shoulder and lower back restraining an inmate, causing 184 days of missed work.

April 4, 2014: Rockland County sheriff's officer twisted knee while pulling a victim out of the Hudson River, causing 70 days of missed work.

July 10, 2014: Pleasantville laborer fractured wrist in vehicle accident, causing 55 days of missed work.

that has convalescing employees come back to work to perform light duty has cut down on prolonged absences.

Dangerous job

Detective Keith Olson, president of the Yonkers Police Benevolent Association, said Yonkers' numbers could be higher because the city might be filing its cases differently than other communities. He acknowledged Spano's observation that absences due to injuries among police officers are down since the mayor took office, but noted that the figure fluctuates.

Olson rejected Spano's view that abuse plays a role in the city's high injury rate.

"We consider it an insult for anybody to say we are abusing the system. This job is extremely dangerous," he said.

Spano said he expects to see declining injury rates as policies he's introduced take effect, including hiring the POMCO Group, a benefits administrator. Spano said the recent decline in police officers on injury leave represented a \$3 million savings.

The type of insurance a local government has can influence the reporting of injuries, said Joseph Romano, an attorney who handles public-sector worker injury cases.

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Hastings	132.5	204.5	11	8.5
Elmsford	140	48	11	7.9
New Castle	165	239	13	7.9
Somers	143	225	11	7.7
Pleasantville	108	231	8	7.4
Bedford	200	176	14	7
White Plains	890	1902	62	7
Dobbs Ferry	130	44	8	6.2
Mount Pleasant	284	327	17	6
Pelham Manor	73	12	3	4.1
Pelham Village	86	142	3	3.5
Lewisboro	90	4	3	3.3
Pound Ridge	64	0	1	1.6
Bronxville	100	0	1	1
Pelham Town	97	0	0	0
Mount Vernon				N/A
Sleepy Hollow				N/A
Harrison				N/A
North Salem				N/A

PUTNAM

Carmel	189	903	21	11.1
Putnam Valley	114	104.5	11	9.6
Kent	114	214	7	6.1
Patterson	101	228	6	5.9
Putnam County	900	290	31	3.4
Phillipstown	91	2	1	1.1
Southeast	88	0	1	1.1
Brewster	35	0	0	0
Cold Spring	34	0	0	0
Nelsonville	6	0	0	0

ROCKLAND

West Haverstraw	21	2	5	23.8
Spring Valley	180	368	31	17.2
Orangetown	400	1411	55	13.8
Ramapo	535	579	49	9.2
Haverstraw	226	352	16	7.1
Suffern	126	205	9	7.1
Stony Point	240	195	13	5.4
Rockland County	2425	3768	127	5.2
Clarkstown	615	632	27	4.4
South Nyack	35	0	1	2.9
Upper Nyack	9	0	1	1.1
Airmont	9	0	0	0
Chestnut Ridge	35	0	0	0
Grand View	2	0	0	0
Hillburn	8	0	0	0
Montebello	6	0	0	0
New Hempstead	1	0	0	0
Piermont	3	0	0	0
Sloatsburg	9	0	0	0
New Square				N/A
Nyack				N/A
Pomona				N/A
Wesley Hills				N/A