

## Chess Champ Plans to Checkmate MTA's Worker's Comp Costs

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Sept. 12, 2002) Like the champion chess player he once was, MTA's new executive officer for Risk Management and Safety Services – Michael Koss – will have to think several moves ahead in his new job.

He's expected to build an organization tasked with improving workplace safety, providing better, faster care to injured employees and, at the same time, reducing Worker's Compensation costs.

It's a game that Koss, the 1971 New York State chess champion, has played before, and successfully.

For 12 years, he was head of risk management and safety at Pan American World Airways. In 1991, he was named Director of Worker's Compensation and No-Fault at the Metropolitan Transit Authority of New York, the corporate umbrella for six transportation subsidiaries with a total of 64,000 employees.

Under his leadership, on-duty injury claims among the 44,000 employees of the largest subsidiary, the New York City Transit Authority, dropped from an average of 7,500 annually in 1991 to a current annual average of 3,700.

In 1991, 75 percent of employee claims involved lost-time injuries. Today, only 49 percent are lost-time injuries. At the same time, Worker's Comp costs at NYC Transit dropped from about \$75 million annually to between \$35 million and \$36 million a year.

### Disability and medical costs rose

"That level has been flat over the past three years," says Koss, "even though New York State's disability rate went up and medical costs rose."

It's those kinds of results that Chief Financial Officer Richard Brumbaugh hopes Koss can duplicate at MTA, where employees have expressed dissatisfaction with injury claims processing and where Worker's Comp costs for the agency's 9,000 employees have reached \$60 million a year.

"We're looking for Michael to implement at MTA the best practices he put in place in New York City," says Brumbaugh. "One of the most significant is case management. He'll be a key force in making sure injured employees get timely and proper medical care and, as a result, may return to work sooner."

## PROFILE



**Michael A. Koss**

**Title:** Executive Officer, Risk Management and Safety Services

**Responsibilities:** Worker's Compensation, Risk Management, Office of Safety Services, Owner Controlled Insurance Program, on-duty injury claims processing, Special Investigations Unit

**Reports to:** Chief Financial Officer Richard Brumbaugh

**Experience:** From 1991 until August 2002, Koss was Director, Workers' Compensation and No-Fault at MTA New York City Transit. From 1979 to 1991, he was Director, Risk Management, Safety Services and Loss Control Programs for Pan American World Airways. His organizational work includes service as a member of the executive committee and chairman of two National Safety Council committees. He is past president of the New York Claims Association, a 450-member organization of insurance carriers, third-party administrators and self-insured companies.

**Education:** Koss is a 1965 graduate of Hartwick College. He earned a master's degree in health program management in 1969 from Long Island University. He also received four National Science Foundation Fellowships for post-graduate studies. He has taught

To Koss, this means creating a “level playing field” on which employees who file legitimate claims can expect fair treatment from the agency. They should receive quality medical care promptly from treatment centers and doctors who bill their services honestly and accurately. And, finally, their claims should be processed and paid quickly.

At the same time, Koss says MTA cannot tolerate abuses of the Worker’s Compensation system – by employees, by attorneys, by providers such as hospitals or physicians, or by the agency, itself. “In New York, we found that providers more often abused the system, than did employees.”

To avoid abuses, every claim will be closely reviewed at several levels, including by nurse case managers who will look at injured workers’ claims from a medical perspective. They will work with MTA claims examiners to ensure that employees receive proper care and that medical treatment bills are accurate.

### Prosecution of crimes

When abuse is suspected, MTA’s special investigative unit – which can employ outside field investigators – will look into the case. Such cases could involve the District Attorney’s office and criminal prosecution.

But, most claims, Koss believes, will never require such measures. “If you’re injured, if it’s real, you’ll get everything you need to get well and go back to work. It’s not our role to block an employee’s entitlement to treatment and compensation.”

As important as proper management of injury claims may be, making the workplace safer and preventing injuries in the first place are equally important, Koss says. He believes it will take a “culture change” for safety to become a way of life at MTA – something that’s still in the making almost a year after the start of the “Safety’s First” program.

But, Koss also is optimistic that the program, originated by Dupont, ultimately will be as successful at MTA as it has been at New York’s MTA. “I worked with Dupont for five years in New York and I have a strong sense of what can be done and how it should be done in order to reach our goals.”

Among the first steps will be to set a timetable for updating safety action plans and to hold managers in the service sectors and elsewhere within the agency accountable for their implementation.

And, although Koss is now in charge of keeping MTA’s safety programs on target, he hasn’t neglected his own safety training. He recently attended the four-hour seminar and plans to attend the two-day executive session the very next time it’s offered.

“I want to compare what we saw in New York,” he says, “to what is being done here.”

[Back to MTA Report](#)

health, safety and related courses as an adjunct professor at several colleges in New York.

**Family:** Koss, 59, has been married 33 years to his wife, Serena, who has taught English and reading on Long Island, N.Y. They have two children, Randall, 24, an actuarial sciences graduate of Cornell University and now an actuary at Aetna Insurance Co. in Hartford, Conn., and a married daughter, Allison, 22, who earned a master’s degree in social work from Syracuse University and who now supervises a mental health clinic in Augusta, Ga.

**Interests:** The 1971 New York State chess champion, Koss once was ranked 20th in the nation and has played against chess master, Bobby Fischer, and others. He also is a tennis enthusiast.