From SARA to Homeland Security: The NIEHS Worker Education and Training Program Confronts Challenges of Environmental Cleanup

Section 126(g) of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986 mandated the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) to establish a grant program for the training and education of hazardous waste operations and emergency response workers. This program, originally established as the Superfund Worker Training Program, has evolved into the Worker Education and Training Program (WETP) and is currently in its nineteenth year of successful operation. Beginning with eleven awardees in 1987, it currently supports eighteen awardees that include more than one hundred organizations nationally. The NIEHS WETP built upon the lessons learned from earlier worker health education and training programs to establish a national worker health education intervention that has demonstrated the capacity of and potential for public health excellence. The principles and practices established as the program’s foundation in its first five years provide a basis for understanding how the program was able to take an active supporting role in response to the national disasters on September 11, 2001.

In 1998, the WETP confidently asserted that “Worker Training is Primary Prevention.” The WETP has emerged as a cooperatively developed public health approach to crafting and delivering worker health and safety education. Public health scientists and professionals directly interact with other professionals and labor leaders, along with rank-and-file union members and non-union workers, in the implementation and evaluation of this important worker health intervention. The WETP has established a national network that, along with its awardees, includes representatives of other government agencies and non-governmental organizations involved in hazardous waste, environmental protection, public health, and labor and industrial development, as well as employers and community-based organizations. NIEHS leadership has promoted and built on a view of public health practice open to exploring how public health principles can best be applied to local conditions, specific industrial sectors and facilities, national regions, and even communities.

WETP administrators were inclined to “let a hundred flowers bloom” to encourage pedagogical and curriculum experimentation in diverse industrial sectors and learn how industry-specific organizational contexts might affect how interventions function. They established and have supported an interactive public health process with multiple mechanisms for feedback and review in order to permit flexibility and determine the required scope of interventions. As a result of the process, the scope has been adjusted a number of times throughout the program’s history, giving the program indisputable legitimacy as well as prestige.

When it began eighteen years ago, the WETP may have seemed a far-sighted if overdue venture. But the value of training workers to protect their own health and safety and thereby the public’s—to work not only pro-actively but also protectively—attained its most graphic and public impact as the rescue, recovery, and cleanup efforts progressed after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. NIEHS responded immediately and delivered 3,000 respirators to the site. It gave expert support to coordinate occupational health issues during the recovery and cleanup processes. Recognizing the enormity of the
From SARA to Homeland Security: The NIEHS Worker Education and Training Program Confronts Challenges of Environmental Cleanup

needed emergency response, rescue, and recovery effort, WETP and some of its awardees were key participants in the federal government’s response. WETP also commissioned short-term technical assistance and coordination that included assessing the safety and health status of response personnel at Ground Zero and preliminarily determining the health and safety training needs of workers at the site. The integration of search-and-rescue operations with recovery, removal, and remediation tasks conducted by skilled construction support personnel meant establishing new procedures to protect involved workers. The applicable regulations and the roles of enforcement agencies were confused, given the circumstances. On October 6, 2001, less than a month after the horrific event, the WETP-supported National Clearinghouse for Worker Safety and Health Training issued a report that cautioned...

...rescue, recovery, and other activities have occurred in a scenario never anticipated by the safety and health legislation or the subsequent standards/regulations. The injury and illness reports for the initial weeks of the search-and-rescue activity were at unacceptable levels. Moreover, the exposure data, as well as the potential for serious exposure to toxic materials...among the construction response workers raises significant concerns. Accordingly, how to respond to such situations demands serious attention in the context of worker protection and training needs.

The supplemental funding for WETP awardees in Fall 2003 was dedicated to support the creation, delivery, enhancement, and promotion of education and training materials and activities intended to protect the immediate and long-term health and safety of worker populations who are called on to respond to significant disasters and terrorist attacks using weapons of mass destruction. WETP and its awardees also have recognized that the Minimum Criteria for Worker Health and Safety Training for Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response, and the resulting non-mandatory appendix to OSHA’s HAZWOPER standard, required review and expansion in light of these new developments.

A participatory technical workshop was held in Spring 2005 to create a new consensus document for this purpose. “Minimum Health and Safety Training Criteria: Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response, HAZWOPER-Supporting and All-Hazards Disaster Prevention, Preparedness & Response” was released in January 2006. With the understanding that the hostile destruction of any modern building will create a hazardous waste site that requires emergency response, recovery, and remediation, WETP and its awardees have sought to assure that workers engaged in such activities will have appropriate health and safety training and protection.

The concept of “All-Hazards” has resulted from national efforts to integrate public health with a post-September 11, 2001 focus on homeland security. It covers hazards posed by attacks and incidents using chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive agents, as well as those same hazard categories resulting from natural disasters, failures in safety systems, and infectious disease outbreaks. The WETP has intentionally chosen to focus on prevention and preparedness, as well as response actions, to events presenting these hazards because of its public health orientation; it accepted the charge to prepare HAZWOPER workers in order to prevent morbidity and mortality that might result from their work.

Between the workshop and the release of the report, the U.S. Southeast Gulf Coast area was devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The storms exacerbated weaknesses and failures in the existing flood control systems and destroyed industrial, commercial, and institutional facilities, which released vast quantities of hazardous and toxic materials. Those exposure hazards were compounded with a broad range of biological hazards posed by the resulting conditions faced by workers engaged in the response, recovery, remediation, and reconstruction activities in the affected areas. Residents faced the same hazards as they gradually attempted to reconstruct their lives and communities. As the WETP participated in the federal response to these disaster areas, it sought creative solutions to the training needs of the work force there. The WETP awardees are developing creative strategies to assist the residents in their efforts to safely assess the damage, and where possible, to remediate and rebuild their communities. The lessons learned from these experiences have informed the revised minimum criteria document.

The WETP’s continuing and forward-thinking focus on the integration of worker health and safety and environmental health that builds on the program’s many learned lessons is a fitting testimony to WETP’s nineteen-year record of public health excellence. Within the context of HAZWOPER work, which exists to varying degrees in a majority of industrial sectors, the program continually raises the bar for national worker health education strategies. It also has established a strong model for funding and running a cooperative program that unites federal resources with private and public nonprofit organizations coordinated to promote public health and safety.

(Permission for reprinting this article was granted by Baywood Publishing Co., Inc. This was excerpted from one which appeared in New Solutions, Vol 16 (1), 2006 written by Craig Statin and Mary Lee Dunn.)
Job Safety Effort Underway for Immigrant Workers in Rhode Island

U.S. Labor Department’s OSHA Teaming Up with Labor Studies Institute and RICOSH

Helping Rhode Island’s immigrant workers protect themselves against common workplace hazards is the goal of a new alliance among the U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Institute for Labor Studies and Research and the Rhode Island Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (RICOSH).

“Every employee has the right to a safe and healthful workplace,” said Patrick Griffin, OSHA’s area director for Rhode Island. “Working with the Institute and RICOSH, we seek to equip both young and adult workers with knowledge of their workplace rights and training to help them identify and eliminate on-the-job hazards.”

Under the alliance, OSHA, the Institute and RICOSH will develop and present training and educational programs for adult and teenage immigrant workers about occupational safety and health rights and common workplace hazards. Informational sessions will cover hazards in industries in which immigrant workers are commonly employed, including health care, manufacturing and hospitality.

Alliance partners will also distribute literature and provide educational programs for employers associated with the immigrant community, participate in events and other outreach activities with the immigrant community.

and promote and encourage employers’ participation in OSHA’s cooperative programs.

The alliance was signed September 25 in Providence by OSHA’s Griffin, Carolina Bernal, program director for immigrant workers’ rights with the Institute for Labor Studies and Research; and James Celenza, director of RICOSH.

OSHA health and safety alliances are part of ongoing efforts to improve the health and safety of workers through cooperative partnerships. For further information about this and other alliances in Rhode Island, call OSHA’s Providence area office at (401) 528-4669.

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers are responsible for providing a safe and healthful workplace for their employees. OSHA’s role is to assure the safety and health of America’s working men and women by setting and enforcing standards, providing training, outreach and education; establishing partnerships; and encouraging continual process improvement in workplace safety and health. For further information, visit www.osha.gov.

Left to right: Carolina Bernal, Institute for Labor Studies and Research, Patrick Griffin, OSHA’s area director and James Celenza, director of RICOSH.

The New England Consortium’s Quarterly is a publication of The New England Consortium, based at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

To receive The Quarterly at no charge, contact TNEC. Send letters to TNEC Quarterly at University of Massachusetts Lowell, One University Avenue Falmouth 202 Lowell, MA 01854. TNEC is a partnership between the University of Massachusetts Lowell and the Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health in CT, MA, NH and RI. TNEC provides health and safety training for hazardous waste site workers and emergency response personnel under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

NH COSH Updates

- A new year of health and safety training for immigrant workers in ESOL classes, including how to read labels and MSDS’s for hazardous materials.
- A project to increase workers’ comp access for low-income and immigrant workers.
- NH COSH is launching a new website, www.nhcosh.org

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## TNEC 2007 Open Enrollment Training Calendar

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<th>JAN</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>40-Hour Hazardous Waste Site Worker</strong></td>
<td>M-F 8-12</td>
<td>M-F 26-2</td>
<td>M-F 19-23</td>
<td>M-F 7-11</td>
<td>M-F 4-8</td>
<td>M-F 9-13</td>
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<td>M-F 22-26</td>
<td>*Sat. 3</td>
<td>M-F 3-7</td>
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<td>Sat. hours are 7:30am-6:00pm</td>
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<td><strong>8-Hour Site Worker Refresher</strong></td>
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<td><strong>8-Hour Site Worker Supervisor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>24-Hour Emergency Responder</strong></td>
<td>T-Th 6-8</td>
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<td><strong>8-Hour Disaster Site Worker Emergency Responder Awareness</strong></td>
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<td><strong>OSHA 16-Hour Disaster Site Worker</strong></td>
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<td><strong>OSHA 30-Hour Construction Safety</strong></td>
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<td><strong>OSHA 10-Hour Construction Safety</strong></td>
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<td>M-T 12-13</td>
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*40-hour Saturday sessions are held from 7:30 am – 6:00 pm

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**Wishing you and your family Happy Holidays from the staff and partners of The New England Consortium!**