



Immigrant Occupational Safety Advocates Take Training Beyond the Classroom

Beyond the Classroom – A Case Study of Immigrant Safety Liaisons in Residential Construction

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Overview

The authors describe the development, implementation and initial results of a partnership between New Labor, a membership-based worker center, university researchers and labor educators to train Newark, NJ, immigrant day laborers as workplace safety liaisons capable of recognizing and responding to health and safety hazards in residential construction. The liaisons participate in an annual five-day workshop that includes industry-standard 10-hour OSHA safety training formatted as a learner-centered, participatory, peer-led course as well as ongoing mentoring and support from New Labor staff. Although lacking formal authority, safety liaisons encourage co-workers to use PPE and safer work practices. Intervention from safety liaisons has prompted management to address problems at some worksites and successfully referred other cases for OSHA investigation. Safety audits conducted by liaisons provide insights into working conditions on residential construction sites.

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See abstract:

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Key Findings

- Classroom-based health and safety information is not sufficient to build health and safety leaders. Safety liaisons receive ongoing training in leadership and organizing skills, participate in a New Labor-initiated worker council, facilitate OSHA-10 classes for their peers, and provide leadership in other public forums. These leadership roles provide opportunities for liaisons to improve communication skills, internalize a sense of authority and develop self-confidence in their ability to act.
- Linking safety and health issues with wage theft enforcement promotes worker involvement. Although working conditions are frequently dangerous, day laborers considered unpaid wages to be their most serious grievance. The hardship caused by unpaid wages promotes risky behavior; workers victimized by wage theft must accept dangerous work when offered. New Labor has some success recovering unpaid wages, which raises their profile and the workers' own sense of agency.
- A direct relationship with OSHA has proved empowering. Use of OSHA-branded training and regular contact with OSHA staff lend credibility to liaisons' reports of workplace hazards. OSHA's aggressive response to complaints, when substantiated by investigation, gave liaisons confidence in their own efficacy.
- Even if workers are fully informed of workplace hazards and their legal rights, employers still possess substantial coercive power on the job. Liaisons are attempting to supplement their job site audits by recruiting small contractors to participate in safety trainings and worker council meetings.



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