



Empowering Day Laborers to Work Safely in Construction

Training reaches one of the most vulnerable worker populations



The Challenge

Immigrant Latino day laborers have a fatality rate nearly double that of all other construction workers. Easily exploited because of their undocumented status, limited English and lack of education and construction experience, they are often paid in cash and categorized as “independent contractors” – with no OSHA protections. Fear of losing their jobs or being deported keeps them from speaking out about unsafe working conditions and makes them distrustful of those who could help. As a result, injuries involving construction day laborers are underreported.

The Response

Researchers at Rutgers University Occupational Training and Education Consortium (OTEC), the U. of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey’s School of Public Health, and New Labor formed the Latino Construction Worker Safety and Health Project with support from the NJ Laborers Health and Safety Fund. The goal: understand day laborers’ health and safety needs and develop Spanish-language training to help workers protect themselves and co-workers on the job.

New Labor staff enlisted construction day laborers as peer researchers. Together they visited “the corners” – sites where day laborers congregate – to explain the project, build trust and recruit participants for focus groups and training. Workers participated in train-the-trainer programs to become peer trainers and piloted the training with 95 day laborers. Based on their input, the partners revised the curriculum. Pre- and post-training surveys were used to collect information on the hazards participants face, what they learned from the training and how they will use their new knowledge.



“... we don’t say anything [about conditions], because if I tell him, he’s not going to give [me] work. We don’t say anything so we don’t lose the job.”

— a New Jersey day laborer

The Results



OTEC employed their unique participatory, learner-centered model to develop a health-and-safety awareness program. Using worker feedback, researchers produced *The Day Laborers’ Health and Safety Workbook* based on OSHA’s 10-hour construction health and safety program. It includes 14 team-based activities to help workers recognize job-site safety and health hazards, take steps to protect themselves and understand their rights.



The Workbook was used to deliver training and mentoring to more than 30 workers as peer trainers/facilitators, who in turn offered classroom training to some 450 immigrant construction workers in New Jersey. Several hundred more workers participated in street-corner demonstrations of fall-protection and personal protective equipment.

An evaluation of this participatory training program found improvements in worker’s safety and health knowledge, attitudes and work practices, including increased use of hard hats, work boots, safety vests and harnesses.

In follow-up interviews, participants reported that the training empowered them to more easily ask employers for safety equipment or take actions to work more safely.

A much hoped for outcome occurred: post-training focus groups revealed that participants were teaching their co-workers about safe practices and workers’ rights to a safe workplace.

The CPWR IMPACT

The OTEC/New Labor training model not only made a difference to workers “on the corner,” at training sessions, and at worksites in New Jersey, it is now gaining traction across the nation as new partnerships take root.

- The University of Illinois-Chicago School of Public Health, with support from OTEC/New Labor, is using *The Day Laborers’ Health and Safety Workbook* to help worker centers affiliated with the Interfaith Justice Network and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network develop health and safety training capacity. Dozens of day laborers have been trained to facilitate health and safety classes, and hundreds have received OSHA 10-hour health and safety awareness training in Chicago, Cincinnati, Houston, Austin, Memphis, Milwaukee and Phoenix.
- The Austin, Texas-based Workers Defense Project (WDP) plans to educate more than 600 construction workers statewide in 2012 through its program based on the OTEC/New Labor model.
- The OTEC/New Labor team is now using a similar approach – and the Workbook – in a new project to develop “safety liaisons” on union and non-union residential construction sites.

“The membership-building... component of this safety class is key. Workers see how being organized can translate into concrete changes at the workplace.”

— Augustin Salgado, safety training facilitator at the Workers Defense Project in Austin, Texas



Participants engage in a warm-up session before beginning the training course.

What made it a success?

Tailoring this program to the unique needs of a hard-to-reach and transient group of workers was the key to success for the Latino Construction Worker Safety and Health Project. Other fundamentals:

- Involving the target population and taking the time to build trust “on the corner” where workers gather
- Close collaboration between university-based safety-and-health researchers, a union and a community-based worker advocate with ties to the target population
- Learner-centered, curriculum-development methods that involve day laborers in their own education and in their primary language
- Offering consultation and training support by members of the original New Jersey project team to those in other locations facing similar challenges

“Knowledge by itself isn’t always power; you need organization to help make change. By training themselves in small groups, day laborers create their own tools for change.”

— Project Investigator Lou Kimmel, Director of Operations and Membership, New Labor



A peer trainer checks in on a small group discussion to field and answer participants’ questions.