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Workplace Safety Materials Put Accent on Spanish Speakers

By Finance New Mexico

Spanish-speaking people have been part of New Mexico's work force for hundreds of years. But the dramatic growth of this population — driven largely by immigration — and the anticipated growth well into the future underscore the urgency of culturally tailored workplace safety training.

The Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries has consistently shown higher workplace fatality rates for Hispanic workers than for workers from other racial or ethnic groups, and these rates are highest among Spanish speakers born outside the U.S. Hispanic workers also suffer higher rates of nonfatal occupational injury and illness.



One reason for this is that many Hispanics work in higher-risk industries and occupations, including agriculture, construction, petroleum and gas extraction. But manufacturing and food processing also attract many entry-level workers — including recent immigrants.

Hispanics are also vulnerable to workplace accidents because of cultural and language barriers. Some have little or no proficiency in English, and this undermines the effectiveness of safety materials and hazard warnings printed in a language they don't speak or read.

Others, especially those who lack legal status to work in the United States, are wary of raising safety concerns or reporting workplace accidents or incidents for fear of losing their jobs or being deported.

Found in Translation

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are working to provide employers with effective ways to communicate workplace safety and health information to Spanish speakers. NIOSH has a Spanish language website with workplace safety materials at <http://www.cdc.gov/spanish/niosh/>, while OSHA has a wealth of publications and other resources for employers and employees.

Training materials, by law, must be presented in a language that workers understand, and both agencies are attempting to meet that growing need.

Once an employer obtains Spanish-language occupational safety and health materials, she should review it with employees or external trainers who are fluent in English and the Spanish dialect her employees speak. To be effective, the material must be relevant to the target audience, expertly translated and written in clear, practical, nontechnical language.

Delivery is just as important as content. The employer should reinforce written messages with visual materials and hands-on demonstrations and encourage workers to discuss and exchange safety information among themselves. Trainers should observe whether workers appear to understand the safety information being delivered. If necessary, bilingual workers should help translate anything that seems confusing.

Some employers conduct training workshops outside the workplace and use a trainer who isn't a company manager to encourage discussion and questions. At all sessions, employees should be encouraged to report unsafe conditions and be rewarded in front of their co-workers when they do so.

The most proactive employers make sure key supervisors are trained in conversational and industry-specific Spanish and offer incentives for Hispanic workers to take English classes.

Visit <https://www.osha.gov/pls/publications/publication.html> to find numerous Spanish-language compliance assistance tools and resources. OSHA also maintains a national hotline (1-800-321-OSHA) with a Spanish-language option.

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