

Improving Health and Safety for Low Wage Workers

Completed Occupational Health Branch Activity, 2001-2005

Background

More than 5 million people in California work in jobs that pay less than \$10 an hour. These low-wage workers — janitors, garment workers, restaurant and food service employees — are mostly immigrants or minorities who are not represented by a union. Most do not have basic knowledge of health and safety regulations. Though frequently at high risk of workplace injury and illness, these workers often do not complain or seek treatment. This may be because they fear losing their job, retaliation by employers, deportation or denial of citizenship.

In order to improve health and safety for this vulnerable population, we need to know more about the workplace hazards they are exposed to and the barriers they face in getting health care or workers' compensation for work-related injuries and illnesses. The California Department of Industrial Relations has funded a study of janitors and garment workers in the San Francisco Bay Area to answer these important questions.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to study the conditions of low wage workers in certain sectors in order to identify strategies for implementing effective health and safety programs for low wage workers throughout California.

Activities

To better understand the health and safety conditions of these workers and problems they face, we:

- Visited janitorial worksites and garment shops to observe the work;
- Interviewed employers to hear their perspectives on workplace health and safety and workers' compensation; and
- Interviewed workers to find out what works and what could be improved.

Partners

- Univ. of California San Francisco Occ. and Environmental Health Nursing Program
- Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation, California Department of Industrial Relations
- Public Health Institute

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What kinds of health problems or injuries can I get from doing janitorial work?
2. If I think that I have breathing problems from using janitorial chemicals, what can I do about it?
3. Is there cleaning equipment I can buy that will decrease the chances of my employees getting injured? How expensive is it?

4. My employees work in many different locations and often work in the middle of the night. How am I supposed to train them on health and safety hazards?
5. How can I find out if the cleaning products used at my work can harm my health?

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1. What kinds of health problems or injuries can I get from doing janitorial work?

If you use cleaning chemicals, you may have skin, eye, and lung irritation or more serious illnesses affecting the brain or other organs. You could suffer serious injuries from slipping on wet floors or be struck by heavy equipment such as floor cleaning machines. You may also get muscle or joint pain from doing job tasks that require lifting heavy equipment, repetitive movements, or the use of force or awkward, uncomfortable postures.

2. If I think that I have breathing problems from using janitorial chemicals, what can I do about it?

Many cleaning products contain chemicals that can cause lung problems. If you have breathing problems such as shortness of breath, wheezing or coughing, see a doctor right away. If these symptoms are left untreated, you may develop more serious lung problems such as asthma. To find out what chemicals you work with, ask your employer for a copy of the Material Safety Data Sheet for the products you work with, or get a copy of the labels from the product containers. Show them to your doctor, so he or she knows what chemicals you work with.]

3. Is there cleaning equipment I can buy that will decrease the chances of my employees getting injured? How expensive is it?

Many ergonomic cleaning tools are now available. Examples include mops with adjustable handles for janitors of different heights, and dust mops with “telescoping” handles that make it easier to reach high surfaces for dusting. Check with your local janitorial equipment supplier to purchase these tools. Ergonomic cleaning tools come in a range of prices. Your supplier can help you select those that are within your price range.

4. My employees work in many different locations and often work in the middle of the night. How am I supposed to train them on health and safety hazards?

Cal/OSHA requires employers to train their employees on health and safety and the hazards they face on the job. For janitors, this includes training on hazardous substances, respirators, and prevention of musculoskeletal injuries. Workers must be trained on paid work time. If it isn't possible to do training during evening or night shifts, you may have to arrange a special training session during the day. Cal/OSHA also requires that workers be trained in a language they understand. For more information about some of these training requirements, see Related Links, Resources, which has links to the relevant Cal/OSHA standards.

5. How can I find out if the cleaning products used at my work can harm my health?

If you are using chemicals that may be harmful to your health, your employer must train you on their health effects and safe methods for handling them before you start your job. Your employer must train you on how to use Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs). MSDSs provide information on health effects, protective equipment, and other safety precautions related to the use of products and chemicals. For more information, see the Cal/OSHA Hazard Communication Factsheet and Related OHB Publications.

Related Resources (current at the time project was completed)

- Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology – health and safety topics related to janitorial work [croetweb.com/]
- Western Regional Pollution Prevention Network – health effects of janitorial cleaning chemicals and tools for evaluating the toxicity of the ingredients in cleaning products [www.westp2net.org/Janitorial/jp4.cfm]
- Household Products Database, National Institute of Health – health & safety information on commonly used cleaning products [householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/]

Cal/OSHA Standards and Fact Sheets

- Hazard Communication Standard – explains how employers must inform workers about the hazards of their job [www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5194.html]
- Respirator Standard [www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5144.html]
- Ergonomics Standard [www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5110.html]
- Respiratory Protection in the Workplace - Cal/OSHA Guide for Small Business Employers [www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh_publications/respiratory.pdf]
- Don't Risk Your Health – worker factsheet on bloodborne diseases for housekeepers, janitors, and other workers; also available in Spanish and Tagalog [www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh_publications/donrisk.html]

Related OHB Publications and Activities

Publications

- Glycol Ethers fact sheet
- Guide to Getting Medical Care for Job-Related Pain That Won't Go Away
- If I'm Pregnant, Can the Chemicals I Work With Harm My Baby?
- Molds In Indoor Workplaces
- Removing Graffiti Safely
- Understanding Toxic Substances
- Using Solvents Safely
- Cleaning Products and Work-Related Asthma - journal article, Jo. of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 2003

OHB Activity

- Providing Practical Information on Chemical Hazards

These publications and more information about the work of Occupational Health Branch (OHB) are available on our website: www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohb.