LIFE-AND-DEATH LEARNING: GEORGIA TECH DEVELOPS SAFETY-TRAINING PROGRAM FOR HISPANIC CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Because of language barriers and lack of job experience, the growing population of Hispanic construction workers in Georgia and elsewhere are at greater risk for injury and even death.

In fact, 41 percent of Georgia’s construction-related deaths in 2001 occurred among Hispanic workers. The numbers were even more dramatic in Atlanta, where 61 percent of construction fatalities in 2001 claimed the lives of Hispanic workers.

Statistics show that safety training can prevent such tragedies, so researchers at the Georgia Tech Research Institute (GTRI) have created materials to make federally mandated training more effective for Hispanic construction workers.

“In the construction industry, education really is a matter of life and death,” said Daniel Ortiz, associate director of the GTRI Safety, Health and Environmental Technology Division. “Employees need to be able to recognize hazardous conditions and point them out to supervisors.”

But the majority of existing Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards and programs are written and delivered in English, which creates a problem for Hispanic workers who read or speak little English, said project director Art Wickman, head of the Health Sciences Branch in GTRI’s Safety, Health and Environmental Technology Division. Even when materials are available in Spanish, there is typically so much technical jargon that the content is difficult to grasp.

“Hispanic construction workers may receive safety papers, but often have no idea what they’re signing,” said Juan Rodriguez, an Archer Western Contractors safety specialist who collaborated with GTRI on the project. Workers who need jobs often won’t admit they don’t understand the content of safety materials. He added, “They’re going to nod their heads and say, ‘Sure.’”

That means that protective equipment and procedures can be futile if workers don’t understand how to use them. For example, 10 workers might try to use a fall-protection cable that can only support two workers.

The new GTRI safety curriculum focuses on five areas where the greatest number of injuries and deaths occur among construction workers: fall protection, scaffolding, trenching and excavation, electrical hazard and material...
handling. To accommodate workers with varying degrees of education and language skills, GTRI created a wide range of materials:

- Computer presentations for formal job orientations.
- Detailed presentations geared to supervisors and trainers who already possess a certain degree of safety expertise.
- Workplace posters and hazard bulletins that use colloquial Spanish and convey safety messages graphically for workers with poor reading skills.
- Pamphlets for foremen and supervisors to use during “toolbox” meetings (informal safety meetings).

Translating the OSHA safety information from English to Spanish was more challenging than expected. “A lot of regulatory language is unique to our English vocabulary,” Wickman explained. Idiom was also an obstacle. For example, there may be three different ways to refer to a piece of equipment, depending on whether workers are from Mexico, South America or Central America.

GTRI is distributing the training materials through building associations, statewide and regional OSHA offices and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. The materials can also be downloaded from (www.oshainfo.gatech.edu).

“Even though the materials are free, it’s still an ongoing challenge to get them in the hands of people who need them,” Wickman said.

With that in mind, GTRI is promoting two training initiatives. The first will be carried out through Georgia Tech’s OSHA Safety and Health Consultation Project in the form of two free seminars to be offered in January and March of 2004. Dates and locations are still to be determined and will be posted at (www.oshainfo.gatech.edu).

The second training initiative will be an OSHA 10-hour Voluntary Compliance Outreach Training course, using materials developed by the Hispanic Training Safety Agency (HSTA) in Lawrenceville, Ga., and conducted entirely in Spanish. This course will be co-sponsored by the Georgia Tech OSHA Training Institute and Education Center and the HSTA.

An important hallmark of this course is its focus on workers. “Instead of being targeted to superintendents, this program will be a real outreach for field workers,” said Victoria Chacon, president of HSTA.

The OSHA 10-hour course is slated for April 27-28, 2004 in Norcross, Ga. For more information, call 1-800-653-3629 or visit (www.oshainfo.gatech.edu). To register, call Margaret Chase at 404-385-3515 or register for OSHA training courses online at (www.pe.gatech.edu).

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