

Focus on NGOs

California Group Trains Workplace Health, Safety Leaders

The University of California, Los Angeles, Labor Occupational Safety and Health (LOSH) Program has been instrumental in the development and implementation of a unique state plan to train workers as leaders who will promote health and safety in their own workplaces, a program official told BNA Nov. 10.

The California Workers' Occupational Safety and Health Training and Education Program (WOSHTEP) began in 2002 with passage of a workers' compensation reform bill (AB 749, California Labor Code Section 6345.7(a)), Laurie Kominski, LOSH associate director of program administration, said. The project is funded by a permanent assessment on all paid-out indemnity claims and administered by the California Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation (CHSWC) in California's Agency for Labor and Workforce Development.

LOSH, founded in 1978, is part of UCLA's Institute of Industrial Relations within the College of Letters and Science and the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health within the School of Public Health. LOSH has 12 permanent staff members, all of whom are employees of UCLA, Kominski said. Six are bilingual Spanish speakers. LOSH Program Director Linda Delp's position is funded through a full-time-employee grant from the UCLA School of Public Health's Center for Occupational and Environmental Health. Most other LOSH funding comes from contracts and grants, according to Kominski.

WOSHTEP Program

LOSH and the Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) at the University of California, Berkeley, proposed the idea for WOSHTEP in a 1999 white paper, Kominski noted. In July 2003, she continued, CHSWC contracted with LOHP and LOSH to assess training needs, develop a standardized 24-hour training curriculum, and pilot the curriculum to train and certify "Worker Occupational

Training and Health (WOSH) Specialists."

"Initially, LOSH and LOHTEP were responsible for conducting all the training," Kominski said. So far, LOSH has trained 160 WOSH specialists. Of those, 96 received training in English and 64 in Spanish-language courses.

"However, as we have entered the third year of the program, the emphasis is shifting to developing a network of trainers who will be mentored by LOSH and LOHP," Kominski said. LOSH conducted its first "Training of Trainers" in July, she added.

"Ultimately, LOSH's educational goal is social change for improved workplace conditions."

— LAURIE KOMINSKI,
LOSH

When a WOSH specialist returns from training, Kominski explained, he or she may contribute to the workplace in a variety of ways, such as becoming a trainer, conducting an awareness session for co-workers, helping craft health and safety contract language during labor-management negotiations, joining a health and safety committee, taking part in developing an illness and injury prevention plan, or testifying at public hearings on health and safety issues.

The main benefit of the WOSHTEP program, Kominski said, is that "[w]orkers will become empowered to speak up and take actions that address the health and safety hazards they confront in their workplaces, thus preventing injuries or illnesses and potentially saving lives."

One of LOSH's goals for 2005-2006 with regard to WOSHTEP is to "create a network of Spanish bilingual health and safety WOSH trainers in Southern California who can educate monolingual Spanish workers, research workplace hazards

and controls, and advocate for stronger health and safety policies," according to Kominski. To meet this goal, LOSH plans to partner with local community colleges; the Southern California Committee on Occupational Safety and Health; the UCLA Downtown Labor Center; and other interested community, labor, and management groups.

Hazardous Waste Training

LOSH also is involved in a variety of other programs. For example, it has been providing health and safety training to hazardous waste workers since 1987. "During 2004-2005, the LOSH Hazardous Waste Project focused on expanding training for women and minority workers who are enrolled in job training programs and for Spanish-speaking workers who handle hazardous materials," Kominski said.

The hazardous waste training program is funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and carried out through a consortium of which LOSH is the lead agency. The Western Region Universities Consortium also includes Arizona State University; LOHP; University Extension at the University of California, Davis; and the University of Washington. From July 1, 2004, to June 30, consortium members taught 191 hazardous waste courses to 2,925 trainees, Kominski added.

LOSH also is involved in training projects involving ergonomics problems, maquiladora workers along the U.S. border with Mexico, and youth workers.

While LOSH focuses mainly on training workers, "we do collaborate with many employers" who often request training, Kominski noted, and "serve as a technical assistance resource center."

"Ultimately," she said, "our educational goal is social change for improved workplace conditions, with workers involved in decisions at workplace, legislative, and regulatory levels."

BY BETH DUNCAN