Partnering with Unions, Workers’ Organizations, Workers

Enabling Public Health Research During Disasters

Day 2, Panel 2

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About the Workers

• Depending on the disaster setting, there are multiple sets of worker populations
  – Facility workers (disaster site or destroyed by the event), emergency responders (broad range), skilled support, public health and medical, social work, construction labor

• Do workers have prior knowledge?
  – West, Texas – West Fertilizer Co. plant explosion
  – McLennnan County didn't have an emergency response plan in place
    • One of the responders who worked at the facility reportedly informed his colleagues that even though ammonium nitrate was on the site, it would not explode. (anecdote from CSB investigator)
Low-Wage Labor for Recovery-Remediation

- New Orleans – Katrina – much recovery and remediation work done by immigrant day laborers
- UCLA LOSH – National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON)
  - Joint project to investigate OH&S issues particular to Latino migrant day laborers in the region.
- Immigrant workers were:
  - ...gutting buildings, cleaning up debris and tearing out moldy sheetrock from flooded houses, mostly without protective gear.
  - Going “home” after work, to sleep in their work clothes… because “home” was in an abandoned car or a shelter with nowhere to wash.
  - …sleeping in the street or in soaking-wet tents, pitched in a muddy field at City Park—a privilege costing $300 a month, plus five dollars per shower every time they wanted to bathe.
UCLA-NDLON Study Goals

- Health and safety hazards affecting immigrant workers involved in post hurricane cleanup and recovery work
- The availability of methods to protect workers from hazards, including personal protective equipment and training
- Resources and support available for workers including sources of information, access to advocacy and community-based organizations
- Health and safety training possibilities, including potential partnerships and sites
- The availability of educational methods tailored to workers’ level of literacy, language, and other needs

Interview Research Challenges

• Being unfamiliar with the area.
  – “I spent a lot of time getting lost and orienting myself.”

• The initial distrust and wariness from workers.
  – “They were facing harassment from the police, immigration agents, and other workers so it made sense that they would be cautious before engaging in conversation with a stranger.”

• Try to supplement worker interview data by observing worksites, applying for jobs, and attempting to obtain protective equipment.
  – Red Cross/FEMA site: access for local residents only, and no equipment, while the relief organization nearby had no equipment to spare
  – Contractors responded with hostility and suspicion
  – The same when attempting to observe worksites.
Disaster Research Response Project – DR2P

- NIH funding for NIEHS and NLM
- Develop Concept of Operations (ConOps) for NIEHS preparation & deployment of disaster research team
- Table Top Exercise (TTX), 4-2014, LA
  - Refinery fire due to earthquake-induced tsunami
- Phase 3 “Transition” – as recovery/research begin, collaboration between trainers, researchers, local/state agencies, WORKERS, and communities
  - “must be maintained to sustain research efforts”
Workers can help gather the information – but also are at risk of retaliation for disclosing information that employers do not want disclosed.
DR2P-Worker/Community Research Priorities

• Having clear knowledge of what chemicals are released and an accurate monitoring system to protect the health of workers and community members

• Ensuring that workers, first responders, and community members have the appropriate PPE

• Health and safety issues for workers and how to appropriately train them

• Understanding the physical and psychological impacts that the event may have on communities, response workers, and refinery workers

• Creation of a registry of those exposed
The NIEHS WETP Network of Worker Trainers

• Worker trainers and organized labor can assist with connecting to the community and collecting data
• Worker trainers can help build capacity and confidence in communities, as well as reach transient populations
Hurricane Sandy

- Many response, remediation, recovery, rebuilding workers live in the disaster areas and experienced trauma
  - Their own and those they were helping
    - Home damage/displacement

- Could not get gasoline and the mass transit system was disrupted

- Essential public health, medical, social service workers faced severe barriers to their work

- Multiple disaster exposures – responders exposed to mold were already compromised from WTC dust exposures
Considerations

• How do researchers establish relationships before a disaster?
  – We won’t know where a disaster will occur

• Shall research institutions commit resources to integrate disaster researchers with the community emergency planning and response networks?

• The conflicting needs
  – Disaster prevention research and efforts – to protect workers from these conditions
  – Disaster response research – to protect workers who have to do this work