



# Injuries Increasing for Maryland's Non-English Speaking Hispanic Workers

Maryland's Hispanic immigrant workforce has grown in recent years, due to favorable economic conditions and some changes in immigration policies. But Hispanic workers' inability to speak English, combined with their many cultural differences, can put them at greater risk for accidents in the workplace. In this special issue, we identify some of the challenges facing our policyholders today, and offer solutions to help companies keep their non-English speaking workforce safe.

**H**ispanic Americans are now the nation's largest minority group, numbering some 37 million people and representing 13% of the U.S. population as of July 2001. In Maryland, Hispanics now represent 4.3% of the population, according to the latest census figures available.

Among the reasons for this population explosion are the political and economic opportunities here in the United States. Many Hispanic immigrants come to America because of the promise of jobs, money, and better living conditions for themselves and their children – just as millions of European immigrants did decades earlier.

## Hispanics in the workplace

While the U.S. agriculture industry employs the greatest number of Hispanic workers, the construction industry follows closely behind.

The construction boom in the U.S. has contributed significantly to the rise in the number of Hispanic workers in that industry today. From 1990 to 2000, construction employment jumped 30.8% to 6.7 million workers. Today, Hispanic workers hold nearly 20% of all construction jobs in the United States. This trend is

mirrored in Maryland, with one out of every five construction jobs currently filled by a Hispanic.

In general, non-English speaking Hispanics are employed most often in the framing and drywall industry, and as tile setters, concrete workers, painters, roofers, and landscape laborers. They also work in the food service industry as well as in cleaning and janitorial jobs.

## Hispanics bear a disproportionate share of workplace accidents

Federal and state officials have recently taken note of the "increase in injuries" among Hispanic workers. Disproportionately too many workplace accidents happen to Hispanics as compared to non-Hispanic workers.

While overall workplace fatalities among all construction workers have dropped by 20% over the last decade, the number of Hispanic worker fatalities rose almost 35% in the same time period, according to the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA).

After reviewing worker casualty records at the state level, the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and

Regulation (DLLR) found that almost 40% of all workplace deaths in Maryland last year belonged to individuals with Hispanic surnames. Yet Hispanics only make up about 20% of Maryland's worker population.

Part of the problem, according to DLLR, stems from the high number of immigrant workers taking dangerous construction jobs. They noted that most recorded accidents involving Hispanics involved trenching cave-ins, falls, electrocution, and getting struck by workplace objects.

## Language a barrier to safety

Language barriers contributed to more than 10% of workplace accidents in Maryland last year, according to the Maryland Occupational Safety and Health agency (MOSH), a DLLR unit.

Spanish-speaking workers often receive less job and safety and health training than U.S.-born workers, in large part because they don't speak English well or at all. At many job sites, safety instructions and warning signs appear only in English.

A national survey of Hispanic construction workers published last year by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) shed light on some of the communication issues facing Spanish-speaking workers today.

Survey authors said that most of those interviewed faced substantial challenges when trying to understand what they were told at work. "When safety procedures are explained in English, the Spanish-speaking workers don't understand," they said, and added: "If workers with limited English have a concern or doubt, they keep it to themselves because they can't communicate it to others."

Also, people appear to be less willing to explain things to those with limited English, the survey noted. Further, "It goes without saying that poor English skills limit opportunities for promotion," the authors noted.

"There is a greater need for Spanish-speaking safety personnel as well as safety information and training provided in Spanish," according to NIOSH.

## The illiteracy factor

To compound the language problem, many Hispanic workers in the U.S. have limited literacy in their native language. Many foreign-born workers arrive from rural towns where secondary education and literacy are not a privilege afforded in daily life. Feeding one's family, securing a roof overhead, and earning a living are much more important goals.

## IWIF sees a growing number of workplace injuries/lost time claims among Hispanics.

In 2003, a total of 5,242 injured workers received lost-time payments from IWIF. Of those, approximately 384, or 7%, were to those with Hispanic surnames.

As of 2004, IWIF reports show that 3,742 claimants received lost-time indemnity payments; **of those, some 338, or 9%, had Hispanic surnames.\***

The 2000 Census reported that 43% of the Hispanic American population had not earned a high school diploma, compared to 11% of the non-Hispanic population. Among foreign-born U.S. residents from Latin America, more than half have less than a ninth-grade education.

Because of their lack of education and language skills, foreign-born Hispanics often hold physically demanding jobs that place them at greater risk of injury.

## Cultural differences play a role

Cultural differences can factor into Hispanics' sense of safety on the job. Safety measures most Americans take for granted often have to be taught to those from other countries.

For example, some Hispanic cultures support an attitude of machismo and may take more risks or avoid wearing protective equipment like hard hats or safety glasses in order to underscore masculinity.

Another problem arises when workers only pretend to understand safety

directions. "It is fairly common among people of Hispanic origin, "to say 'yes,' or 'si' even when they don't understand," says one expert.

Says another: "Even if they do understand enough English during a safety talk, for example, many Latin cultures discourage the use of comments or questions in front of large groups."

Learning other U.S. workplace norms requires a learning curve as well. Consider the need for good housekeeping on any jobsite: In Latin culture, housekeeping is traditionally women's work, so the idea of cleaning up the jobsite after lunch

or after a day's work can be foreign to many Hispanic men.

And the concept of getting paid while at home recovering from an injury is not something many Hispanic workers comprehend. There is no paid time off for injury recovery in most of Latin America. You don't work – you don't get paid. It's just that simple.

In addition, roughly half of the Hispanic construction workers in the U.S. are illegal immigrants, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. These workers tend not to complain about unsafe work because they are afraid of losing their jobs or being deported. Many are not educated about their rights to a safe workplace, which may differ from those in their native countries.

## Knowledge and training together can help reduce injuries

Maryland employers appreciate and value the work ethic of Hispanic workers and will continue hiring them. With patience and understanding, and a few new approaches to safety training and supervision, English- and Spanish-speaking employees alike can learn to work together to realize positive safety results for everyone involved. ■

\*Note: IWIF tracks certain demographics among its claimants in order to understand how to better serve our clients.