

US Study Has 4 Strategies to Improve Temporary Worker Safety



Safety programs are typically geared toward ensuring the health and safety of fulltime staff and may overlook the needs of temporary workers, such as seasonal retail or farm workers, day labourers in construction and workers from temp agencies. As a result, such workers may be more vulnerable to injury on the job. (In fact, a study by the IWH reached exactly that conclusion.)

A recent white paper from the Center for Progressive Reform looked at what it calls 'contingent' workers in the US. The researchers conducted case studies on contingent workers in farming, construction, warehousing and hotels. Each group faces particular safety hazards.

For example, contingent workers in construction often take on some of the most dangerous tasks, such as painting and roofing. And such workers in warehouses face increased risk of musculoskeletal injuries from lifting and moving goods.

Based on the results of the case studies, the researchers recommended seven strategies for improving health and safety for contingent workers. Some of these strategies only apply in the US. But here are four strategies that would also apply to temporary workers in Canada:

1. Education and training: Contingent workers are often thrust into new jobs for which they have little formal training. So employers should ensure all temporary workers get a minimum level of job- and site-specific training on their assigned tasks, known hazards, relevant PPE and safe work practices, and the proper methods for reporting hazards and injuries.

In addition, the paper recommends that temporary workers get training on their rights under the OHS laws. (Ontario's MOL recently proposed a regulation that would require *all* workers and supervisors to get safety awareness training.)

2. Stronger enforcement: Government agencies in charge of enforcing the OHS laws

should target industries where contingent workers are most prevalent and issue penalties against employers that have large numbers of contingent workers and fail to make special accommodations for those workers in their OHS programs. (Ontario's MOL is already doing this to some extent in its inspection blitzes.)

3. Research: Organizations and agencies that research workplace safety issues should develop a clearinghouse for information on the health hazards in industries where temporary workers are most commonly used. Technical data and statistics should be made available to policymakers and safety advocates, while other publications should be developed specifically for workers.

In addition, new studies in this area should be used to determine whether there are loopholes in the OSH laws as they apply to responsibility for the health and safety of temporary workers that should be closed. (For example, companies may mistakenly believe that temp agencies are solely responsible for the health and safety of the workers they send out.)

4. Enhanced foreign-language capabilities: Government workplace safety agencies should make efforts to communicate effectively with workers who have limited English proficiency as many temporary workers do. For example, they can develop relationships with foreign consulates that can help with education, training and enforcement. They should also create written safety materials in a variety of languages, including those often used by temporary workers. (Some jurisdictions, such as BC, MB and ON, are already providing a lot of safety materials in many different languages.)

Employers should also take steps to improve communication with temporary and other workers for whom English isn't their first language, such as by providing safety materials and training in multiple languages.

Safety Smart has tips for keeping temporary workers safe and information on another study on temporary workers. Not a Safety Smart member? Sign up for a free 14-day trial.