

## **Protecting Workers with Developmental Disabilities**

### **Introduction**

Very little research has been conducted to address the occupational health and safety of workers with developmental disabilities. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) identified ten issues in workplace safety and health for persons with developmental disabilities. Although the research was conducted in eleven sheltered workshops, many of the issues are prevalent in other employment situations such as day habilitation and supported employment. The report indicates a strong need for further study and increased awareness by employers. To read the entire text of the research and recommendations, go to the Research and Current Trends section of this web site or go directly to the site by clicking on: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/nioshtic-2/20020729.html>.

### Ten Issues in Workplace Safety and Health for Persons with Developmental Disabilities

#### **1. Emergency Medical Services and First Aid**

Unless a workplace has medical facilities within three or four minutes' response proximity, staff should be trained to provide first aid, and first aid supplies should be available at the site. Although it may not be required, NIOSH recommends CPR training for staff. Knowledge of worker's health issues would also increase safety.

#### **2. Ergonomics**

Employers may need to be vigilant to ergonomic aspects of tasks since some workers may not associate pain or injury to their work. Some employment programs for individuals are based on piece rate payment for repetitive tasks. Repetitive tasks are the source of some worker injury such as carpal tunnel syndrome. The risk for injury may affect the worker's health as well as productivity.

#### **3. Exposures to Chemical and Physical Agents**

When workers are in a situation with the possibility of exposure to chemical or physical agents such as dry cleaning fluid, for example, there are a number of things employers should consider. Very little research has been done to determine if individuals with developmental disabilities and coexisting medical conditions present any increased risk for exposure. Job placement evaluations should include a consideration of potential risk factors and include assessments from licensed health care professionals. The individual and anyone who assists an individual to make decisions should consider risks of exposure before making a decision to work in an environment where possible chemical or physical agents may be present.

#### **4. Hazard Communication Training**

Standard Hazard Communication training may not be effective for some persons with developmental disabilities. The curriculum should be adapted and modified to address variance in workers' learning styles. Some recommendations include the addition of pictures or diagrams and less reliance on lecture and text. Assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of training will assure employers' knowledge that workers are adequately informed.

## **5. Hepatitis B**

NIOSH recommends that employers and employees consider vaccination for pre-exposure to Hepatitis B for those at risk. It further recommends adherence to OSHA's blood-borne pathogen standard. This includes a written exposure plan and employee training.

## **6. Pica**

Ingesting or attempting to ingest non-food items may be a presenting problem for some employees. Employers and staff should be aware of the person's behavioral tendency and take all individualized necessary precautions, including any appropriate behavioral support interventions.

## **7. Recording Occupational Injuries and Illness**

Recommendations for reporting apply to sheltered workshops that are subject to OSHA regulations. OSHA form 200 should be completed for any injury and illness that occurs. The information recorded should be analyzed for trends and planning.

## **8. Warning Devices and Alarms**

Alarms warn workers when equipment is in use and when it malfunctions. Such devices also alert workers of danger, such as fire or severe weather. Adaptations or procedures may be necessary for workers with visual or auditory deficits. Selection of alarm type (sounds, strobe or other flashing lights) should take into consideration any seizure-inducing aspects of the devices.

## **9. Warning Signs**

Some individuals with developmental disabilities may not understand traditional workplace signs. Some recommendations include the use of a slash over a graphic figure to indicate prohibition. Community standard signs such as a stop sign may be more effective than one that says that workers may not enter here, for example.

## **10. Workplace Violence**

Recommendations from NIOSH include training staff in violence prevention and management of aggressive behavior. Workers should be trained in personal safety skills and assertiveness. Background checks of applicants may screen out potential perpetrators of abuse or those with histories of committing assault.

## **Summary**

NIOSH released this report in an attempt to increase awareness of health and safety issues affecting workers with developmental disabilities. Employers and managers of programs for persons with developmental disabilities should review health and safety programs and ensure that ALL employees are well protected.