

Kennedy Slams Fatality Rates for Immigrant Workers

Feb 28, 2002 12:00 AM, By OH EDITORIAL STAFF

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) is taking the federal government to task for its record of occupational safety and health for immigrant workers. Kennedy, in a statement released yesterday, said the fact that fatalities for Latino workers increased by more than 11 percent in the year 2000 was "unacceptable."

"It is not right that more than one-quarter of workers in the meatpacking industry, primarily immigrants, experience a serious injury or illness on the job," said Kennedy. "It is outrageous that child farmworkers, who make up only 8 percent of working minors, account for 40 percent of work-related fatalities among minors."

A hearing yesterday of the Employment, Safety and Training subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, chaired by Kennedy, found John Henshaw, administrator of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), being questioned about the agency's efforts to protect immigrant and low-wage workers. Other witnesses included United Farmworkers Union President Arturo Rodriguez and Omar Henriquez, coordinator of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health's Immigrant and Youth Program.

Saying that immigrant workers are vital to the nation's economy, Kennedy said, "In recognition of the important contributions of immigrant workers, we must do more to protect their health and safety on the job."

He noted that the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that as many as 300,000 farmworkers, who are overwhelmingly immigrant workers, suffer pesticide poisoning each year, and added that occupational health and safety laws offer little in the way of protections to farmworkers.

He also commented that immigrant workers face extreme hazards in many other areas of work, from construction to meatpacking to retail work. Kennedy noted that many of the workers involved in the clean up of Ground Zero were immigrants, calling them "heroes."

As noted in the OccupationalHazards.com article "NRDC: World Trade Center Attacks Created Environmental Emergency," first responders - firefighters, police and construction workers - and later, cleanup workers, faced the greatest health risks from the contaminated air. And in many cases, they were working without the proper respiratory equipment.

Citing a report by the U.S. Geological Survey, Kennedy said Ground Zero workers should have been told "that the air around Ground Zero was as caustic as liquid drain cleaner. These workers stepped up for our nation and we in Congress must now strengthen the protections for the safety and health of immigrant workers."

Kennedy said he's pleased that the Department of Labor is expanding the range of bilingual services available to workers, but added, "I am struck that the administration is slashing the

budget for proven immigrant worker safety training programs at the same time."

The administration proposes budget cuts to the Susan Harwood Training Grant program, which has been crucial to training immigrant workers, of nearly 65 percent. "This is no way to show our commitment to protecting immigrant workers," Kennedy pointed out.

He also noted that American workers have been waiting a year for the Department of Labor to adopt a new ergonomics standard, adding that he's looking forward to hearing what Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao has to say at a Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing scheduled for March 14.

"The time is long overdue for strengthening the health and safety protections for immigrant workers who contribute so much to our nation," said Kennedy.