

# **Oregon's Workplace Health and Safety: Looking Forward to 2020**

## **Lunch Workgroup # 3 - Refugees, Immigrants and Global Health**

### **Key Points of Discussion:**

#### **I. Influx of foreign workers in Oregon workforce**

- a. Expanding workforce- need not being filled by people from Oregon, but rather by people from other states and other countries
- b. Health care workers are being imported into our healthcare system. The poor integration of new workers (lack of social awareness) could lead to an increase in medical errors.
- c. '93-'98- 10,000 refugees (?) came to Oregon, many settled in Multnomah County
  - i. This has led to an increased prevalence of many diseases- tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, dental issues
  - ii. These people are still working, came into workforce with preexisting health issues.

#### **II. Language Issues in the workplace**

- a. Pressure from advocates to "do something about it"
- b. Translating trainings/documents/etc. may have benefits, but also disadvantages
- c. Many employees with little formal education have difficulties reading and writing
- d. There is a 9-month "grace" period (where they receive \$900/month for survival) for refugees to understand everything about American language and culture and get a job before they are "on their own"
  - i. This is a very short period of time, especially for those that are raising children etc, to be able to comprehend an entire foreign culture
  - ii. How do we address this?
  - iii. After 9 months they are supposed to have a job have an apartment, etc.- after this they lose health care, and all social supports
  - iv. Large number of refugees coming in, relatively small number of people trying to help them with schooling, health care, language issues, etc.
  - v. Office of Refugee Resettlement decides where they will go. They are generally sent somewhere were others from their region have already settled; they enter an existing community.
  - vi. Many arrive with health issues, and often psychological problems from issues in their home country
  - vii. Some arrive knowing little about life outside of refugee camps

### III. What are the employers' obligations?

- a. There are often two competing approaches:
  - i. Employers ask themselves: "How do we use this workforce as a resource for lower costs, increased productivity, etc?"
    - 1. Wariness to address cultural concerns in the workplace
  - ii. Stewardship approach: "How do we address issues of safety, health, etc. while retaining a viable business plan?" (moral obligations come first)
    - 1. Attempt to incorporate cultural difference in workplace training, health, and community issues
    - 2. Employers must learn what tools to use to create a healthy blended workforce
    - 3. Employee power- making sure employees understand that they have the power to question the safety of their assignments, and the voice of the manager, supervisor is not always right.
      - a. In some cultures, the voice of an authority (supervisor, manager, owner) is always right, and one would not dare question their directions
    - 4. Cultural mentor program? Similar to that which is used in day laborer programs.
      - a. Help garner a general understanding and acceptance of diversity in the workplace
- b. There is still a huge disparity between groups of employees (the "haves and the have not's")
  - i. Difference in level of training (or comprehension of the training they have been given)
  - ii. Access to health care?
    - 1. Most immigrant farm workers that come here are employed (i.e. they come here because of a job availability). They are working, but they are often not receiving the health care that others are.
    - 2. Employers must put resources in places where those with little education, no Internet access, etc. can access them.
  - iii. Whose responsibility is this?
    - 1. May be a moral obligation, but employers are not legally obligated to provide this.
    - 2. These populations are disenfranchised and they are very easily discriminated against.
    - 3. Day laborers organization- Portland has tried to give these workers more rights, especially those involved in the underground economy (paid cash, no receipts, no records)
    - 4. There are resources (though need outweighs supply) to help deal with these issues (dental care for struggling

- families, etc.) but many employers do not have the resources to provide this for their employees.
- iv. Some say there is a lack of resources for many employers
    1. How do we make these more widely available
      - a. First we need to understand what these resources could be...
    2. There must be an exchange. i.e. refugees/immigrants must understand American culture, and American employers/workers must understand the culture of others
  - c. There must be a certain degree of cultural understanding for employers
    - i. You can't just expect them to "come in and do their job"
    - ii. Everyone brings baggage, especially immigrants and refugees
    - iii. Employers should know the difference between immigrants and refugees, as well as history between nations and cultures. Certain peoples will not get along because of cultural differences.
    - iv. You can't solve all of these problems, but emphasizing the goal of the business (e.g. production of some product) and how you don't have to be best friends with everyone but everyone can focus on the job at hand and accept differences
    - v. Health care- Understanding what different peoples are used to in their home countries/cultures- incorporating this into the way in which you treat their maladies
    - vi. Eating- Cultural differences- In some cultures, overweight=wealthy; binging when food is available to prepare for long periods without food. These can all cause significant health problems
      1. Adopting the more unhealthy parts of American food culture (e.g. fast food) can lead to a less healthy workforce

#### **IV. Resources for Immigrants and Refugees**

- a. Many arrive with very little understanding of American culture
  - i. There are resources to help with adaptation to new culture, but the demand far surpasses the supply
- b. English language training
  - i. Not enough classes, teachers available to supply this to the large non-English speaking population.
  - ii. How much English training do/should most employers offer?
  - iii. Are these resources available?
    1. Some say yes, others say no
  - iv. Should provide training on culturally competent communication in a person-to-person manner
  - v. Resources in multiple languages makes people less willing to learn how to deal with English-only forms

1. Do you first supply them with English-only forms to provide the impetus to learn how to understand them, and only provide the forms in their native language if they are unable to figure it out?
- c. Conflict resolution training- using cultural common ground as a means to resolve conflicts. Goes both ways between employee and employer

**V. Future workforce- What do we do to prepare today's youth to be a part of the future workforce?**

- a. The children of refugee and immigrant populations are generally doing a great job of assimilating into American culture.
- b. Shifting power from adults to children? (because of the children's ability to shift between social groups and understand more of what is going on around them)
- c. How important is assimilation for refugees and immigrants?
  - i. Many legal immigrants are already prepared in many cases (those that are coming in for the high-tech job market)
  - ii. Undocumented workers are often times a different story (often pursuing jobs in the low-tech market: farm work, construction, etc.)
- d. Younger generation is not physically fit
  - i. Parenting issue? Education issue?
  - ii. Instead of keeping the diet of their native countries, many children in immigrant/refugee families are adopting the unhealthy practices of American food culture (e.g. fast food)