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Safety "Pays" for Hispanic Employees, Company Owners, and Extension Professionals Active in Urban Agriculture Industries

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Safety "Pays" for Hispanic Employees, Company Owners, and Extension Professionals Active in Urban Agriculture Industries

Abstract

The landscape industry and other urban agriculture industries are dangerous, and many of the workers in these industries are Hispanic. The financial, emotional, and social costs of workplace injuries are substantial. Extension personnel, business owners, and all workers benefit when safety trainings are held in Spanish. The impact, benefits, and ease of conducting safety trainings in Spanish for Hispanic workers in urban agriculture industries are discussed.

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Introduction

Hispanics are the largest minority group in the U. S. at 42.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). They are also the fastest-growing ethnic group, with a 3.3% increase in population from July 1, 2004, to July 1, 2005 (Bernstein, 2006). Hispanic workers predominate in Georgia's urban agriculture industries. Urban agriculture industries include businesses involved in golf course management, turfgrass production, installation and maintenance, landscape construction and maintenance, ornamental plant production, and garden supply sales. In Georgia, this sector contains approximately 6,888 firms, employing just fewer than 80,000 employees and generating an estimated \$8.1 billion in revenue (Landry, 2005).

Landscape and horticultural work can be hazardous. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, 2008), there were 11,500 reported accident cases in the U. S. in 2003 among businesses engaged in landscape architecture, garden planning, lawn mowing and fertilizing, sod laying, garden planting, arborist services, line-clearance tree trimming, and ornamental tree planting. In 2004, 169 fatalities were reported. Motor vehicles, machinery, and tree/shrub trimming were major causes of injury in landscaping and horticultural services. Sprains, strains, cuts, and punctures were the most reported injuries.

The costs of workplace injuries are substantial. They include medical bills, ambulance service fees,

insurance premium increases, lawsuits, care for injured workers, lost wages, and medical supplies. Serious injuries leading to disability or impaired mobility can affect the worker's earning potential for a lifetime. The emotional and social costs are less tangible, but just as real.

There are several barriers to effective safety training for Hispanics in urban agriculture industries. Many of these businesses are relatively small. In Georgia, the median income is \$800,000 per company (Bauske & Landry, 2007). Many businesses lack the resources to provide safety trainings. Hispanic workers may have limited reading skills in one or both languages. Often employers and workers lack a common language, complicating educational efforts.

Given the hazards of the work and critical importance of safety training, safety education in Spanish makes sense. These workers and their employers cannot afford to wait until the language skills of all involved allow for a thorough understanding of the subject. Safety "pays" for the employees, for employers and for Extension professionals. Here, we present the benefits to all parties of conducting safety training in Spanish.

Since 2002, Extension faculty and county Extension personnel have implemented statewide safety trainings in Spanish. Over 800 workers have been trained to date using methods previously published (Martinez-Espinoza, Fonseca, & Chance, 2003). Trainings are designed to cover:

- General health guidelines (back injuries, repetitive motion injuries, poisonous plants, insect and snake bites, and heat stress and heat stroke),
- Equipment and tool safety (general guidelines and mower, weed eater, edger, leaf blower and pruner safety), and
- Pesticides (toxicity, exposure reactions, routes of exposure and signs and symptoms of poisoning) and pesticide safety.

Safety "Pays" for Hispanic Workers

As measured by pre- and post-training exams, participants increased their knowledge and awareness of safety in landscape work (Figure 1). It is more difficult to quantify the positive feedback and energy in the classroom. Workers are thrilled to learn that poison ivy plants are the cause of their irritating rashes and that lifting technique will ease back stress. The workers frequently manifest their resolution to increase safe practices in the workplace. They clearly enjoy the "Certificates of Completion" they receive that attest to their training.

The workers also appreciate the positive economic impact of this training. They quickly make the connection between lost wages, medical bills, and injury.

Figure 1.

The Impact of Safety Training for Hispanic Landscape Workers on Pre-Training and Post-Training Safety Test Scores



Safety "Pays" for Company Owners

Employers are very supportive of the hands-on training program. They understand that trainings are an "investment." Employers are keenly aware that this training may result in significant financial savings. It pays by reducing costs on medical bills, ambulance service fees, insurance premium increases, lawsuits, care for injured workers, lost wages, and medical supplies. Comments such as these are common, "Thanks so much for your visit yesterday and a great day of education for our employees!" (R. Staughton, personal communication, December 17, 2008).

Due to the seasonality of landscape work, there are many opportunities to give the trainings in the

"off season." Trainings are also held at industry educational events. As more Hispanics move into middle management, these events provide an opportunity to train these managers, institutionalizing and internalizing safety practices in the company.

Safety "Pays" for Extension Professionals

There are benefits for Extension professionals willing to provide safety training to Hispanics working in urban agriculture industries. This field offers a unique opportunity to reach this underserved population with industry support. Employers are willing to bring workers to the training, supply facilities, and assist with expenses. Safety training programs in Spanish are very well received. Materials have been developed and are widely available. It is relatively easy to measure the impact of the training.

No previous knowledge of Spanish or fluency is required. Usually there are Spanish-speaking individuals who are eager to help. In Georgia, Spanish-speaking Master Gardener volunteers, program specialists, and county agents are trained to implement trainings. Train-the-trainer education can be done in English, with slides sets and other materials provided in Spanish.

Funding is widely available for these programs. The program in Georgia has received funding from the Department of Labor, University-based initiatives, and non-profit trade associations. This is an advantage in an academic environment of increased competition for limited resources.

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