

RISING TO THE OCCASION: THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR GOES TO WAR

“What we have learned yet again since September 11 is just how great a country America really is. We have seen it in the heroism of the firefighters and the police officers. We have seen it in the overflowing generosity of American citizens to volunteer relief agencies. And we have seen it in the rapid coordinated response of our government at every level. Over the years, our government has created a strong safety net for families at risk, and today the Department of Labor is making sure that this net is catching as many of those who need help as possible.”

— U.S. SECRETARY OF LABOR ELAINE L. CHAO

The Department of Labor responded immediately to the September 11 terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon with a package of programs and services to meet immediate needs and promote economic recovery.

Major outreach programs include:

Unemployment Insurance: First in the line of defense for America’s workforce in the 21st century — and long before — is unemployment insurance, the federal-state partnership providing temporary income to laid-off workers in order to alleviate personal hardship. Unemployed workers are entitled to benefits if they meet state qualifying and eligibility requirements. A fact sheet on unemployment insurance is available from the Department of Labor at www.dol.gov.

Disaster Unemployment Assistance: In areas of New York City and Arlington County, Virginia where President Bush has declared a federal disaster, disaster unemployment assistance (DUA) provides financial assistance to individuals whose employment or self-employment has been lost or interrupted as a direct result of the events of September 11. Individuals are eligible for DUA only if they are not able to access regular unemployment insurance. This includes those who have become the breadwinner for a family because the head of household died.

Rapid Reemployment Services: Because the long-term solution to a household’s immediate economic challenge is reconnection to the labor force, Rapid Reemployment Services are provided



Source: Shawn Moore, U.S. Department of Labor

through One-Stop Career Centers, where all citizens can access services tailored to their individual needs. This includes employment and job training services, local labor market information, career planning and guidance, and supportive services such as child care assistance.

America's Career Kit: While the One-Stop Career Centers provide the physical infrastructure, *America's Career Kit* provides the technological infrastructure. Through *America's Career Kit*, electronic tools are available to assist workers with finding a job, utilizing available training opportunities or conducting career planning. There is no cost to businesses or workers who use this service, which is available at www.eworkforce.org/careerkit/.

Veterans, National Guard & Reservists: The Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) has information for veterans, National Guard or Reservists who may be activated for military service. National Guard and Reserve members called to active duty, and their civilian employers, have certain rights and responsibilities under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). This Act is administered and enforced by VETS, which has issued a fact sheet and an interactive computer program, the *USERRA Advisor*, addressing the rights and responsibilities of individuals and their employers under the law. Also, the Pension and Welfare Benefits Administration (PWBA) has information on pension and health benefits for National Guard and Reservists called to active duty.

World Trade Center Relief Workers: The Occupational Health & Safety Administration (OSHA) is helping to ensure that the World Trade Center site is safe for those involved in the recovery effort and those who work or live in the area. OSHA is pitching in to assist with worker safety measures and working with the Environmental Protection Agency on asbestos tests and air quality monitoring, as well as offering advice about personal protective equipment and issuing thousands of respirators to search and rescue workers in New York City. "Terrorists have made 'ground zero' one of the most hazardous workplaces in America. To lose any more lives at the World Trade Center site would compound a tragedy. We are determined not to let that happen," said Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao. "The workers at ground zero who are reclaiming

the site deserve the best protection we can offer, and that is what we are going to give them."

Mine Safety and Health Administration: MSHA offered rescue teams and equipment, mobile command centers, and seismic detection devices to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for use in locating survivors of disasters similar to those occurring on September 11. MSHA stands ready to contribute rescue and recovery assistance when called upon.

People With Disabilities: The Presidential Task Force on Employing Adults with Disabilities has compiled disaster-related information targeted to people with disabilities on their DisabilityDirect Web site at www.disability.gov. The Employment Training Administration (ETA) has also announced approximately \$6 million in competitive grants

TOLL FREE NUMBERS TO CALL FOR QUESTIONS REGARDING:

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| ★ Job Loss, Layoffs, Business Closures, Unemployment Benefits and Job Training: | 1-877-US-2JOBS |
| ★ Reemployment Rights for Veterans, National Guard or Reservists: | 1-866-4-USA-DOL |
| ★ Loss of Pension and Health Benefits or Health Care Portability: | 1-866-4-USA-DOL |
| ★ Injuries and Fatalities: | 1-866-999-3322 |
| ★ Pay, Overtime and Family Medical Leave: | 1-866-4-US-WAGE |
| ★ Workplace Safety and Health: | 1-866-4-USA-DOL |
| ★ Other Department of Labor Questions: | 1-866-4-USA-DOL |
| ★ TTY Number for all Department of Labor Questions: | 1-877-889-5627 |



Source: Sean Redmond, U.S. Department of Labor

funds for multistate employment and training projects serving people with disabilities. This skill-training grant program targets projects that provide multi-site training and other employment services to individuals with disabilities that result in long-term, unsubsidized employment. Call (202) 693-4939 for further information.

Pension Plans and Health Care Coverage: The Pension and Welfare Benefits Administration is offering filing extensions for plan administrators, employers, and others affected by the disaster, as well as general guidance on compliance with the Employment Retirement Income Security Act regarding employee benefit plans impacted by the terrorist attacks. Workers and employer/plan sponsors with questions about pension or health benefits may contact the nearest PWBA regional office by telephone or mail, or submit questions electronically at www.dol.gov/dol/pwba/.

Federal Employees: Federal civilian employees injured while on duty during the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks or subsequent rescue

operations are covered by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. Surviving spouses of federal employees and dependent children are also entitled to benefits, as are rescue workers who have been deputized by the Federal Emergency Management Administration. For questions about claims relating to the September 11 tragedies, see the Employment Standards Administration's

Office of Workers' Compensation Programs online at www.dol.gov/dol/esa or call (202) 693-0040 for assistance.

Of course, the Department of Labor is coordinating its efforts with many other government programs at all levels. www.FirstGov.gov, the official U.S. government portal to 47 million pages of information, services, and online transactions, has recently compiled *America Responds to Terrorism*. This site includes links to a wide variety of federal resources responding to the aftermath of September 11. The list is updated frequently. Check it out. ■

OSHA ADVICE ON EMERGENCY EVACUATIONS

No one expects an emergency or disaster, especially one that affects them, their employees, and their business directly. Yet workplace emergencies — such as explosions, fires, floods, tornadoes, chemical spills, toxic gas releases, or even terrorist attacks like those at the World Trade Center and Pentagon — can strike anyone, anytime and anywhere. Businesses may find themselves forced to evacuate when they least expect it, so it's smart to have a plan. According to OSHA, an effective plan contains the following elements:

- ★ Determine how to alert employees to an emergency;
- ★ Identify who is in charge during an emergency;

- ★ Specify evacuation policy and procedures;
- ★ Establish evacuation routes and exits; and
- ★ Designate an assembly area and procedures to account for all employees following an evacuation.

A newly released OSHA brochure, *How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuation*, helps employers anticipate and plan for workplace emergencies. The brochure is available on the OSHA website at www.osha.gov. For more information about OSHA standards and emergency action plans, contact your local OSHA area office or visit the agency website.