

Worker Education and Training Program (WETP)

Millions of Americans have jobs that bring them into regular contact with hazardous materials, including dangerous by-products generated by the nation's industries and toxic waste removed from Superfund sites and other highly polluted areas. When hazardous materials are transported off site for treatment, storage, or disposal, members of the general public may also be put at risk.

In 1986, Congress created the Worker Education and Training Program (WETP), a nationwide grants program administered by the NIEHS that trains current and future hazardous waste workers and emergency responders in how to protect themselves and their communities from exposure to hazardous materials encountered on the job. In toxic dumps, contaminated urban areas, nuclear weapons complex facilities, and abandoned factories across the country, WETP-trained workers perform dangerous and difficult jobs every day. Their training ensures that cleanup will be performed in such a way as to protect people present at the site as well as members of the surrounding community. Almost one million American workers have been trained under the WETP.

An independent review panel that evaluated the WETP found that it "fulfills its legislative mandate, produces high-quality training, and is making a significant contribution to hazardous waste worker training nationally." Businesspeople, academicians, and policy makers credit the program with minimizing the number of fatalities, injuries, and illnesses that would otherwise have accompanied the nationwide increase in hazardous materials work and traffic. "NIEHS provides excellent training resources to enhance worker knowledge of safety and health," says Stew Burkhammer, manager of environmental safety and health services at Bechtel Corporation. "Employees who have utilized the training under the NIEHS program seem to be safer workers. And they share the benefits of that training with their coworkers who have not received that training." Burkhammer says that the benefits of employing NIEHS-trained employees show up in lower accident rates and reduced worker's compensation premiums, which, in turn, provide contractors a better opportunity to win bids.

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