



For immediate release March 27, 2014
Contact: Roger Kerson, 734.645.0535; roger@rkcommunications.net

Hispanic Immigrant Workers to Testify at Safety Hearing

New Limits Needed on Workplace Dust, Say Those Who Breathe it Every Day

Washington DC –Hispanic immigrants from the construction and foundry industries who are directly affected by silica dust, a widespread industrial hazard, will testify today before an administrative law judge of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

“We are exposed to the poison,” said José Granado, a construction worker from Houston who came to the United States from El Salvador 15 year ago. “I came to the U.S. looking for a better life. However due to risky and unsafe work that I’m doing in the construction industry, it’s looks like that instead of getting a better life, I came to give mine away.”

- Who:** Seven Hispanic immigrant workers from the construction and foundry industries
- What:** U.S. OSHA hearing on proposed rule to limit exposure to silica dust
- When:** Thursday, March 27 -- Testimony schedule to begin at 3 pm
- Where:** U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington DC

At issue is a landmark new regulation, the first proposed by OSHA in many years, which would limit exposure of workers to silica dust. Hearings on the proposed rule, which began at the U.S. Department of Labor on March 18th, will continue through April 4th. Dust from building materials and other industrial processes is common in construction, foundries, glassmaking, hydraulic fracking and other industries.

Experts from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) have testified that exposure to silica dust can cause silicosis, lung cancer, pulmonary tuberculosis, airways diseases, and autoimmune disorders. OSHA is proposing a new limit of 50 micrograms of silica dust per cubic meter of air space, a standard that was first recommended by NIOSH in 1974.

Seven immigrant workers from Houston, Milwaukee, New Jersey and Philadelphia will testify in Spanish today with the aid of an interpreter. Today’s testimony is a rare opportunity for top government officials to hear from workers directly impacted by proposed safety regulations.

The workers are affiliated with local worker centers and health and safety groups, including Fe y Justicia Workers' Center in Houston, Voces de la Frontera in Milwaukee, New Labor in New Jersey and the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health.

“Immigrant workers often have few options but to take dirty, dangerous jobs that lack proper safety precautions,” said Jessica Martinez, deputy director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, a worker advocacy coalition. “These men and women typically work outside the standards of a union contract, which can make it especially difficult to access training and protection from silica dust and other workplace hazards. They are breathing in dangerous dust every day. Their voices must be heard when considering how to make our workplaces as safe as possible.”

According to Granado, contractors routinely ignore safety precautions.

“They only care that the construction project will be completed on time. They don’t care that we work long hours, and we are exposed all those hours, they don’t give us any protective equipment, do not use water or any equipment to vacuum away the dust.

Some coworkers are afraid to report what happens, because the first thing the company tells us that if we do not want to work in that conditions, if we do not like, we have to go to work elsewhere.”

Also testifying today is Jonas Mendoza, a construction worker from New Jersey who is a safety liaison for New Labor. He plans to tell OSHA:

“In the construction industry contractors do not provide the workers with the basics to do the job. In many instances if you ask for protective equipment they give you a mask from the 99 cents store to shut you up... All the contractors should be more considerate with their workers. There are feasible ways to control dust, to prevent contamination of the environment and without hurting the people that perform these jobs.

We are also exposed to dust and we have a high probability of getting lung related diseases as a result of inhaling hazardous dusts. We don’t even know that is affecting us. Many times we do these jobs without any protection. We are exposed to hazards on demolition jobs in unsafe conditions, in places that are not cleaned, places where there is not even a place to wash your hands before eating. Places where everything is cover in dust.”

In addition to today’s witnesses, who are directly affected by dust exposure, National COSH workplace safety experts will testify before OSHA next Tuesday, April 1st.

Note to reporters and editors: An interpreter is available for interviews with Granado, Mendoza and other Spanish-speaking workers who will testify today.

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National COSH links the efforts of local worker health and safety coalitions in communities across the United States, advocating for elimination of preventable hazards in the workplace. For more information, please visit coshnetwork.org. Follow us at **National Council for Occupational Safety and Health** on Facebook, and **@NationalCOSH** on Twitter.