

You are not alone

Members examine health & safety issues

“The more members we have who are educated, prepared, and willing to take action, the safer and healthier we’ll all be,” remarked Joyce Powell in her keynote address at the October 2005 Health and Safety Conference. Throughout six breakout sessions and a lunchtime panel discussion, presenters emphasized the value of collective action in addressing work environment issues.

In the Whistleblower Protection breakout session, labor attorney Bennet Zurofsky noted, “The Conscientious Employee Protection Act, known as the Whistleblower Act, is about an individual’s action. But the preference is to act collectively so that it isn’t a matter of just one person’s security and health. When we’ve got everybody working together, with the whole association behind us, we have power.”

In Keeping Workers Healthy, Dr. Iris Udasin of the Environmental and Occupational Health Science Institute noted the various routine actions that need to be taken to maintain a healthy work environment. “All of these are better accomplished if they are the responsibility of a committee and not dependent on one person,” Udasin maintained.

During the Health and Safety Committees session, Adrienne Markowitz, a certified industrial



NJEA Worksite Safety and Health Chair Anne Marie Abercrombie (R) congratulates the Denville EA on the formation of their Health and Safety Committee. From left, Kristina Johnson, Susan Haase, and Melodie Novak.

hygiene consultant from the N.J. Work Environment Council, provided participants with effective collaborative strategies for local associations.

In the midst of a gripping breakout session called Gang Awareness, Det. Javier Castellanos of the Passaic County Sheriff’s Department Gang Intelligence Unit stated, “There is gang activity in all 21 counties.”

Along with Det. Sgt. Herman Carter, Castellanos educated participants on the history and activities of gangs. Castellanos and Carter demonstrated signs school employees should be aware of when suspecting gang activity. Castellanos noted that

local police departments and county prosecutors’ offices can assist locals interested in learning more.

Sessions were also offered on the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Health and Senior Services.

Concluding her remarks, NJEA President Joyce Powell said, “Protecting our members and improving their quality of life goes beyond economic considerations and job security. We have a responsibility to look out for something you value even more than your checkbooks: your health and physical safety.”

Road map to a local association health & safety program

1 COMMIT

Make membership health and safety a priority. Enlist the assistance of your UniServ field representative.

2 ORGANIZE

Form a local health and safety committee. Establish a process to receive and respond to hazards and health problems.

3 RESEARCH

Examine district injury and illness logs. Review district health procedures. See if the district is in compliance with PEOSHA requirements.

4 DOCUMENT

Survey members. Conduct walk-through evaluations. Use checklists.

5 EDUCATE

Use the NJEA Health and Safety Manual. Hold training sessions. Show videos. Keep the membership informed and involved.

6 ASSIST

Assist sick and injured workers with treatment and compensation.

7 PROBLEM SOLVE

Prioritize problems and identify solutions. Ask the district to implement solutions. Follow up to make sure changes are made.

8 MOBILIZE

Enlist the help of parents, students, community groups, elected officials, activist groups, the media, and other allies.

9 NEGOTIATE

Negotiate and enforce contract language on health and safety.

10 USE PEOSHA

File complaints when necessary. Know what is regulated and what is not. Participate in inspections.

Form a Health and Safety Committee

“What made my ordeal worse was that my board, my administration, and sadly even some of my colleagues didn’t take me seriously,” Anne Marie Abercrombie disclosed at the October 2005 Health and Safety Conference. Members dealing with health and safety issues often feel very alone.

If you are one of a few members first affected by a workplace health concern, others may question the existence of a problem. You may not know which actions can be taken to improve the environment.

That is where a health and safety committee comes in. A health and safety committee puts the force of the Association behind your concerns. Rather than one individual going it alone, ongoing structures and procedures are created to improve the work environment for everyone.

“It shouldn’t matter only to you when you have a health and safety committee; you are not alone,” insisted Adrienne Markowitz, of the New Jersey Work Environment Council.

According to the NJEA Health and Safety Manual, “A strong association



NJEA provides training and assistance to locals interested in creating health and safety committees. For more information contact your UniServ field representative.

health and safety committee is the most effective way to provide a safe and healthy school. The association committee should be a standing committee in the NJEA local, working closely with local leaders and UniServ representatives. Members need not be experts in health and safety; interest and concern about the issues are more important.”

At the conference, the Denville Education Association (DEA) and the Randolph Education Association were recognized for their formation of health and safety committees. DEA member



Left, Elizabeth Stokes of New Brunswick EA gathers information at the Keeping Workers Healthy workshop, while above, Adrienne Markowitz of the N.J. Work Environment Council explains health and safety committees to members.

Melodie Novak noted, “There has been a cooperative effort between the DEA and administration in dealing with health issues. By forming a committee we’re being proactive. We want to improve.”

Fellow DEA member Kristina Johnson agreed, but added, “It’s been cooperative, but we need to take some action.” Johnson hopes the committee will be the spark that leads to the resolution of outstanding concerns.