



Photo of trainees following 40-hour HAZWOPER course. (Photo courtesy of Charmaine Woolard, IBT).

## International Brotherhood of Teamsters Consortium

In the late hours of February 3, 2023, the residents of East Palestine, Ohio were jolted from their sleep by evacuation orders to leave their homes or to shelter in place. Today, many questions still loom regarding the long-term implications of the hazardous chemicals contaminating their community.

Organizations funded by the NIEHS [Worker Training Program \(WTP\)](#), like the [International Brotherhood of Teamsters \(IBT\) Consortium](#), aim to protect workers and communities from exposure to hazardous chemicals following train derailments and other emergency incidents.

### Meeting workforce needs

The IBT Consortium consists of 11 training centers across the U.S. and nine rail unions. Collectively, they aspire to train workers and communities how to safely respond to accidental releases of hazardous chemicals, and protect vital transportation infrastructure related to trucks, rail cars, and shipping containers.

The IBT Consortium was established in the early 1990s when Lamont Byrd, the recently retired principal investigator for the consortium, and his team decided to pursue a NIEHS WTP grant to conduct hazardous waste remediation training. Upon receiving the grant, Byrd and his team were required to develop training curricula based on guidance outlined in the [NIEHS WTP Minimum Health and Safety Training Criteria](#).

In the early years, the consortium primarily focused on developing curricula to train site workers who worked in and around Superfund sites. The consortium has since evolved, now offering training that covers topics such as nuclear waste cleanup, operation of heavy machinery, and emergency response to accidental releases. Today, the consortium reaches thousands of workers across the country



**Lamont Byrd, former director of the IBT Safety and Health Department, retired in December 2022.**  
(Photo courtesy of Charmaine Woolard, IBT).

in a wide range of industry sectors, including freight and aviation, global supply chain logistics, construction, and building material manufacturing, to name a few. In 2022 alone, the IBT Consortium trained approximately 7,048 workers.

Some IBT Consortium trainings are site-specific, especially those for workers at U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) sites. These trainings are supported by funding from the [NIEHS/DOE Nuclear Worker Training Program](#), one of [several program areas](#) that fall under the NIEHS WTP. The IBT Consortium has several instructors who conduct roughly 200 training courses each year for more than 3,000 workers at DOE facilities. These workers are trained on how to control hazardous and radioactive waste, and receive routine annual updates about site-specific standards, regulations, and policies.

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## Ensuring training and accessibility for the underserved

According to Byrd, the IBT Consortium has always had the foresight to push for inclusivity and accessibility in its training methods and approaches, because the goal is to meet workers where they are. One method that has proven successful over the years is IBT's mobile training units. These units are handy in reaching workers and communities in remote locations, and they are dispatched to different locations upon receipt of a training request. The mobile training units are key for building long-term resilience and maintaining a strong community presence in locations that fall outside the geographic area of IBT training centers. For example, IBT uses a mobile training unit to reach the Navajo Tribe in Winslow, Arizona despite not having a facility in the nearby area. The consortium's efforts with tribes and other underserved populations is growing as more training opportunities in Washington State and Houston are on the horizon.

Byrd explained that the consortium has long understood the need for bilingual instructors to reach underserved and historically disenfranchised populations. Today, the IBT Consortium has a total of six bilingual instructors on staff who teach in Spanish and English.

The consortium also leverages partnerships with local employers and nonprofit organizations in various locations. Partnerships with businesses and employers help provide trainees with access to new job opportunities and financial security. On the other hand, partnerships with nonprofits ensure a direct connection with reputable stakeholders on the ground who can help intervene or respond to a hazardous incident. In fact, a significant portion of trainees transition from their community-based organization position into IBT membership (union-based) jobs or establish long-term relationships with the IBT Consortium.

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## Responding to COVID-19, climate change, and other hazards

Many IBT members are essential workers, providing services in the transportation and supply-chain distribution, waste and recycling, construction, fuel, and food manufacturing and processing industries.

Byrd said during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical for the IBT Consortium to use creative approaches to reach and educate these workers. For example, approximately 20 podcasts were created and distributed, particularly to truck drivers, to meet them where they are and inform them of COVID-19 hazards in the workplace. Additionally, the consortium developed COVID-19 factsheets to share with workers and conducted virtual and asynchronous trainings where permissible.

As climate change becomes a bigger challenge for protecting workers, the IBT Consortium is working with local unions and environmental justice organizations to train workers who are involved in decommissioning fossil fuel plants and the cleanup of coal ash facilities. By engaging in this process, the consortium is ensuring that these workers, typically representing marginalized communities, are informed about hazards, engaged in the cleanup process, and empowered to be environmental stewards of their neighborhoods.

**IBT Consortium mobile training unit. (Photo courtesy of Charmaine Woolard, IBT).**



**Trainers delivering 40-hour chemical emergency response course to railroad workers on tribal reservations in Winslow, Arizona. (Photo courtesy of Charmaine Woolard, IBT).**



**Worker in UPS truck. (Photo courtesy of Charles Austin, IBT)**



Climate change also amplifies the risk of serious injuries on the job, especially as it pertains to increasing temperatures. Heat-related injury is prevalent for workers in regions like the [Pacific Northwest](#) and Midwest, where many employers are ill-equipped to handle significantly hot temperatures. The IBT Consortium's continual engagement and [training on heat-related injury and illness prevention](#) ensures that transportation workers, like sanitation and package delivery workers, are equipped with life-saving resources during their shifts.

## Looking forward

The East Palestine train derailment left thousands concerned about the health and safety of workers and local communities. Days following the incident, locals watched as flames and clouds of hazardous smoke filled the sky, and numerous stakeholders ranging from concerned citizens to environmentalists and labor unions began to push for improved rail safety. Many of the chemicals released following the incident may cause serious health issues for nearby residents. This has led to numerous [monitoring and response efforts by federal agencies](#), such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Charmaine Woolard, program manager for the IBT Consortium, said they have seen an increase in interest related to the topic of [chemical spills on rails](#); as a result, they are planning on developing some courses on the topic. Through these courses, the consortium will train rail workers how to prevent and respond to uncontrolled releases of harmful chemicals. This is one of the primary goals of the IBT Consortium's [Rail Workers Hazardous Materials Training Program](#), which is funded by the NIEHS WTP.

Incidents like the East Palestine train derailment happen far too often. It is critical that workers and communities become aware of the ways they can influence health and safety regulation at their local level, and to form coalitions to coalesce collective power to protect their community from preventable chemical spills.

Now retired, Byrd reflected on lessons he learned over the years that helped him continue fighting the good fight. He shared advice he would give new and emerging health and safety professionals so they will not lose hope. As he describes it, it is a war of attrition. "Never forget that we serve working people - people on the front lines," Byrd said. "We owe it to them to give them the knowledge and tools they need so they can go home safely."

These words are a reminder to continue to battle injustices that disproportionately impact those who are already underserved.

**Of all weather-related factors, heat is responsible for the most fatalities and injuries in the U.S. according to recent statistics from the National Weather Service.**

**Chemical emergency response (accident investigation) training in response to East Palestine train derailment. (Photo courtesy of Charmaine Woolard, IBT).**



The IBT Consortium is funded by the following WTP [training program areas](#): the Hazardous Waste Worker Training Program; the HAZMAT Disaster Preparedness Training Program; and the NIEHS/DOE Nuclear Worker Training Program.

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