

Worker Training Program

An NIEHS Superfund-Related Activity

The Worker Training Program (WTP) provides health and safety training for thousands of workers who may be involved in handling hazardous materials or in responding to emergency releases of hazardous materials. These workers gain new skills on how to safely handle, remove, and contain hazardous waste, such as chemicals, asbestos, radiation, and lead.

Recognizing the threat posed by dangerous chemicals and other pollutants left in toxic waste dumps nationwide, Congress created the landmark Superfund program in 1980 to clean up various sites. The WTP was created through the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986, under the Hazardous Substance Basic Research and Training Program (42 USC 9660a).

WTP is part of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), one of the National Institutes of Health. Since 1987, WTP has funded a network of nonprofit organizations that conduct training in every U.S. state and territory. The program is committed to creating a national workforce that can protect themselves, co-workers, and communities from environmental hazards. Training is a key part of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's federal regulations protecting workers engaged in hazardous waste operations.¹

Between 1995 and 2021, more than 13,500 workers were trained in the Environmental Career Worker Training Program, with an average job placement rate of 70%. Completing the training increased an individual's chance of employment by about 59%.



Photo courtesy of Atlantic Center for Occupational Health and Safety

Training Programs

WTP provides grants to labor-based health and safety organizations, academic institutions, and other nonprofit organizations to deliver training to workers who may face a hazardous work environment, such as:

- Environmental cleanup workers
- First responders
- Health care employees
- Industrial or construction workers
- Law enforcement officers
- Transportation or rail workers

Some training is tailored to specific populations, such as underemployed or non-English-speaking workers.

Currently, WTP has six major training programs.²

The **Hazardous Waste Worker Training Program**, initiated in 1987, provides occupational safety and health training for workers who may be engaged in activities related to hazardous waste removal, containment, or chemical emergency response. This program is the core component of WTP. Nearly 4.5 million workers have been trained since its inception.

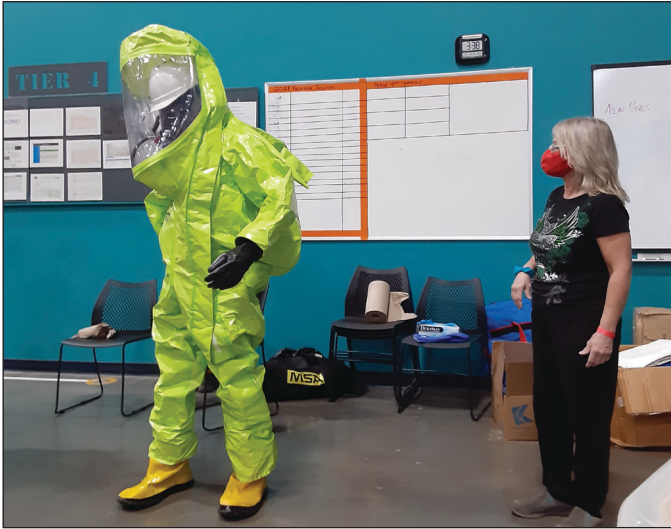


Photo courtesy of Midwest Consortium for Hazardous Waste Worker Training

The **Environmental Career Worker Training Program**, formerly the Minority Worker Training Program, began in 1995. It has provided job training to more than 13,500 workers in communities that are underserved and that have environmental justice concerns. The program teaches the skills necessary to obtain employment in environmental cleanup and construction fields.

The **HAZMAT Disaster Preparedness Training Program** supports the development and delivery of training to prepare workers for hazardous material and debris cleanup commonly needed after natural and human-made disasters. The program, started in 2005, has trained about 223,000 workers.

The **Small Business Innovation Research E-Learning for HAZMAT Program**, started in 2001, provides grants to organizations to develop e-learning products, such as virtual reality and hand-held device applications. These products support the health and safety training of hazardous material workers, emergency responders, and skilled support personnel.

The **NIEHS/Department of Energy (DOE) Nuclear Worker Training Program**, initiated in 1993, provides safety and health training for hazardous material handlers and waste workers at DOE facilities. Many of these workers are engaged in the cleanup of closed nuclear weapons facilities,

which are some of the most dangerous radioactive sites in the world. Workers deal with radioactive wastes, spent nuclear fuel, excess plutonium and uranium, and contaminated soil and groundwater. About 695,000 workers have been trained under this program, which is funded by DOE.

Infectious Disease and Biological Hazards Training develops and delivers programs on the prevention of occupational exposure to infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, Ebola, Zika, and highly contagious flu. A variety of occupations are served. These training courses have been funded under various emergency appropriations and delivered to tens of thousands of workers, including nurses, first responders, environmental service workers, and others.

For more information on available training, go to <https://niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat>.

Courses

The WTP network of grantees offers more than 90 courses each year. Many of these are tied to Superfund site cleanup and regulatory requirements. Other courses, such as General Construction Safety and Hazard Communication, teach workers and employers how to recognize, avoid, and prevent health and safety hazards in the workplace. WTP also supports the development of new curricula for emerging threats, such as opioid safety for first responders, working with nanomaterials, and dealing with infectious diseases.



Photo courtesy of International Association of Fire Fighters



Photo courtesy of Western Region Universities Consortium

Economic Impact

Through the Environmental Career Worker Training Program, NIEHS partners with state and local organizations across the U.S. to provide health, safety, and life skills training, as well as career guidance. Between 1995 and 2021, more than 13,500 workers were trained, with an average job placement rate of 70%. A study of the program's impact³ estimated that completing the training increases an individual's probability of employment by about 59%.

The study also found that the program has a positive nationwide economic impact. The benefits include increased earnings; reduction in workplace injuries, hiring costs, crime-related costs, and federal benefits like food and housing subsidies; and additional tax revenue due to increased employment rates and higher earnings. The program serves as a model for other federally funded worker training programs, helps to advance environmental justice, and supports ex-offender rehabilitation.

Responding to Disasters

When disasters strike, WTP coordinates its network of grantees to provide training for response, recovery, and cleanup. Organizations in the WTP network are often called upon to provide awareness training for workers, communities, and volunteers. They may also conduct train-the-trainer courses to teach people how to train others. The network is part of the U.S. National Response Framework.

WTP has been part of the response to, and recovery from, major U.S. disasters and public health emergencies, including:

- COVID-19 pandemic
- Deepwater Horizon oil spill
- Ebola outbreak
- Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, Harvey, Irma, and Maria
- Water crisis in Flint, Michigan
- World Trade Center attack

National Clearinghouse

The National Clearinghouse for Worker Safety and Health Training⁴ is a resource for hazardous waste worker curricula, technical reports, and weekly news on hazardous materials, waste operations, and emergency response. Funded by WTP, the clearinghouse provides technical assistance to WTP staff, grantees, and the general public. Training curricula developed by grantees is available through an online curricula catalog.

Many clearinghouse tools are available in different languages, and all are available to download from the clearinghouse website.



To support disaster response, the clearinghouse has training tools that address a variety of disasters, such as:

- Chemical incidents
- Earthquakes
- Hurricanes and floods
- Infectious diseases
- Mold cleanup and treatment
- Oil spills
- Terrorist attacks
- Responder and community resilience
- Wildfires

Pocket booklets are also available from the clearinghouse and can be used by workers at a disaster site. For example, since 2017, the clearinghouse distributed tens of thousands of booklets in response to hurricanes in Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and Texas.

WTP is a partner in the NIH Disaster Research Response Program (DR2). This program⁵ provides training, funding, and a Resources Portal of tools to empower human health research in response to disasters and public health emergencies. WTP developed a Researcher Deployment Guide⁶ and helped plan multiple disaster research exercises for DR2.



Photo courtesy of Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

For more information on the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, go to <https://niehs.nih.gov>.

For more information on the NIEHS Worker Training Program, visit <https://niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat>.

For more information on the National Clearinghouse for Worker Safety and Health Training, or to subscribe to the weekly e-newsletter, go to <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp>.

¹ OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). 2018. Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER). Available: <https://www.osha.gov/emergency-preparedness/hazardous-waste-operations> [accessed February 14, 2022].

² NIEHS (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences). 2018. Worker Training Program: Program Areas. Available: https://niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat/training_program_areas [accessed February 14, 2022].

³ NIEHS (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences). 2018. The Economic Impact of the Environmental Career Worker Training Program. Available: https://niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat/wtp_ecwtp_report_508.pdf [accessed February 14, 2022].

⁴ NIEHS (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences). 2018. National Clearinghouse for Worker Safety and Health Training. Available: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp> [accessed February 14, 2022].

⁵ NIH Disaster Research Response. Available: <https://niehs.nih.gov/research/programs/disaster> [accessed February 14, 2022].

⁶ NIEHS (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences) Worker Training Program. 2018. Emergency Support Activation Plan Researcher Deployment Guide. Available: https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/public/hasl_blob.cfm?ID=11006 [accessed February 14, 2022].