

Getting Ready for Teen Workers This Summer

By John E. Allen

377 ABW/SEW Kirtland AFB NM

"Youth comes but once in a lifetime," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote. So perhaps while managers and supervisors are getting ready for summer-hire workers to grace our offices, we might take a moment to think of just how valuable, impressionable and fragile these youth really are. While contemplating the hiring of numerous of these inexperienced/untrained workers, safety experts around the base are advised to take another look at teaching their teen workers to safeguard their health and productivity.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Approximately 70 teens under age 18, die of work related injuries each year. More than 200,000 are injured on the job, many requiring emergency medical treatment. These statistics have raised a red flag for base safety personnel. While OSHA is spearheading efforts to improve nation wide safety for working minors, our home team is examining where our efforts could best be focused.

Just by looking at the numbers above, supervisors need to spend more time and do a better job of training the summer-hires. Indications are that many teens do not receive health and safety training on the job. They are pointed to a desk or work area. The assumption is that they receive training from observation or osmosis. Everyone needs to understand the child labor laws and gain a better understanding of how they affect safety. Because these laws can be overwhelming to understand, many co-workers and supervisors put their summer-hires at risk. They further place their introduction into the work force in peril by not giving them a need for safety applications.

Here are some of the statistics presented by NIOSH. Although child labor law prohibits employing youths 16 and under in cooking and baking jobs, one third of the injured were identified as cooks. In another study, while older teens are prohibited from working on hazardous occupations and on motor vehicles, teen motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death.

Work is beneficial. Introducing teens into the workplace teaches them a work ethic and useful skills, but it must be done without sacrificing health or safety. Some helpful hints are listed which can produce a work-oriented teen.

Comply with child labor laws and safety regulations

Assess and eliminate hazards

Evaluate equipment to be used

Supervise teen workers

Train them to recognize hazards and use safe work practices, and fastidiously, faithfully evaluate their compliance

Seek employees' assistance to develop an injury/illness prevention program

Teach work-study skills in a comprehensive training class

When possible, pair up experienced, mature workers with younger workers. Teenagers may require more safety training than older employees

Stress the hazards of cordless and battery operated tools

Make personnel aware of the hazard umbrella around the point of operation of electrical tools

More companies and defense units are developing better orientations, depending upon what they do. But, training must be ongoing, not one time a video or reading a manual. The summer-hire must become familiar with their workplace. They must understand employee safety and how to identify and deal with safety hazards. They must have personal involvement; somebody to go over safety issues with them. They must sense concern and care for their well being. Most are just out of high school and are eager to learn. Safety knows no generation gap. Teens have a tendency to believe that they are invincible and are too smart to have bad things happen to them. We in safety believe that familiarizing yourself with younger folk's way of thinking, culture and lifestyle helps. Keep tabs on what they are up to and why. Remember; personal involvement, proper training, reinforcement and communication are the key to retaining good, safe teenage and summer hire employees.