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Workers' Deaths Follow Trend

By Thomas Maier
STAFF WRITER

The deaths of five workers when a scaffolding collapsed at a Manhattan office building Wednesday highlights the growing health and safety threats for immigrant workers in New York, as shown by new federal numbers showing a sharp jump in workplace deaths among immigrants last year.

All five of the workers who were killed and many of the 14 others who were injured were immigrants, believed to be from Mexico and Ecuador.

According to the recently released numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 39 percent of all fatal occupational injuries in New York State last year (91 out of 233) involved immigrant workers, a jump of 11 percentage points from the previous year. For fatalities involving workers in New York City, the percentage was even higher: 74 out of 111, or 67 percent. Both numbers were record highs for the United States and were considerably higher than the national average of 14 percent. The increase in the New York numbers came at the same time overall worker deaths declined in the state.

Workplace safety advocates said the numbers reflect that many immigrant workers, especially undocumented immigrants, take jobs in risky areas such as construction, where the lack of proper training can prove fatal.

"We're seeing a lot more day laborers like these who have been injured on the job," says Joann Lum, director of the National Mobilization Against Sweatshops, a Brooklyn-based organization helping immigrant workers. "Some unethical bosses using the World Trade Center disaster are even further exploiting them because they know that jobs are hard to get."

"The most dangerous and dirty jobs are being done by immigrant workers," explains Joel Shufro, executive director of New York committee for occupational safety and health, a nonprofit group funded with government and outside grants. "I think the chances of this happening again will increase."

Immigrant workers often lack sufficient training for dangerous jobs such as climbing a 14-story building on scaffolding, says Dr. James Melius, director of the New York State Laborers Health and Safety Fund, which oversees the construction industry. "This is what happens if you don't have training," he said.

Shufro said he believes New York has the nation's highest rate of immigrants killed last year in the workplace in part because the state has not been vigilant enforcing safety standards and because of an unwillingness to prosecute employers guilty of maintaining unsafe work conditions leading to fatal accidents. He also points to reports that one of the workers in Wednesday's accident is 17 years old, an apparent violation of the state labor law.

"These same companies that don't do the right things with safety," explains Nancy Clark, safety expert at Mt. Sinai's Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine, "are the same companies who pick up these day laborers on a street corner and pay them only a few bucks an hour."

Government safety officials say they will examine the fatal scaffolding collapse as part of an ongoing review of dangers facing immigrant workers, especially those from Latin America, says Bonnie Friedman, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration.

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