Screenings Offered for Nuclear Weapons Site Workers

Gordon Rowe has heard all the jokes about glowing in the dark.

Still, this Augusta, Ga., Local 1579 member knows that during the 16 years he worked at the Department of Energy’s Savannah River site and the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion plant, he was working around some very dangerous material.

He was working around nuclear weapons.

Maintenance, repair and new construction go on daily at sites that build nuclear weapons, so construction workers are there, just doing their jobs. But in the time they are on a site—whether a few days or years—they may be exposed to incredibly harmful substances, such as beryllium.

Electricians may know it as a lightweight but hard metal that’s easy to shape and a good conductor of heat and electricity. It’s used in aerospace parts, semiconductor chips, nuclear reactor fuel rods—and nuclear weapons.

Performing maintenance or demolition where beryllium was used can disturb beryllium dust on floors, in ceiling tiles, or on pipes, labeling that dust as a hazard that can make a person sick within a month or 30 years—from bumps on skin and wounds that don’t heal to constant coughing, shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing up blood, right-wing sweats, loss of appetite, and rapid heartbeats. Those are the symptoms of chronic beryllium disease, a treatable, but preventable, disease. Beryllium also can cause lung cancer. There’s no way to tell who will be affected or how they will be affected by beryllium dust. But if you’ve worked at a DOE site with nuclear weapons, it is best to be tested for beryllium and other hazardous materials.

Rowe knows. Not only did he get tested with a free screening through the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program, he now helps run the outreach office for construction workers who have worked at any DOE site.

"Any construction worker who was on a Department of Energy site that involved nuclear weapons needs a screening—even if you worked just one day," says Rowe. Beryllium is not the only problem. Workers may have been exposed to asbestos, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury, radiation, silicon and other health hazards. Most of these exposures happened years ago when the government was not as forthcoming about the health hazards construction workers might face. But many of these health problems can lay dormant and undetected.

"The efforts of the Building Trades and the Center for Construction Research & Training have helped a tremendous number of construction workers find things they didn’t know they had," says Rowe. When a health problem related to their DOE work is identified, these workers can be eligible for compensation and a medical benefit to help cover the costs associated with their treatment.

The free medical screenings offered at the covered sites listed on the map on the right are run by the building trades program. Screenings include a work history interview and a medical exam. Screening participants also discovered DOE work-related health issues may apply for government-funded benefits for treatment by filing a claim with the U.S. Department of Labor under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act. This program offers workers medical coverage for the illness from the date the claim was filed and a lump-sum payment.

Although the process was lengthy, says Rowe, he recently had his claim approved for his work at Portsmouth. "It took three years," he says, "but I finally got compensated."

Rowe, left, and Charles Fennegan, both former workers at the Department of Energy’s nuclear weapons site at Savannah River, help screen workers for health problems. Rowe and Fennegan have been members of Augusta Local 1579 for more than 30 years.