Election Aftermath

Fighting for Good Jobs Still Number One Priority

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YOU TALK ABOUT A SURVIVOR, I'M A real survivor,” Charles DePriest, LIUNA Local 83 member, declared in reference to the 26 years he spent working on four different Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear weapons facilities. What followed those words brought them into focus. “I'm just lucky to be alive.”

Getting sick never entered DePriest's mind when he first set foot on the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant at the young age of 18. Far from his mind were thoughts of hazardous materials like radiation, asbestos, beryllium, and silica among others that are now synonymous with DOE work.

As his work continued on into the 1970s at other DOE sites, his perspective began to change, particularly when he witnessed the removal and burial of a two-ton bandsaw because it was “too hot,” a reference to something that had absorbed a deadly dose of radiation. “We never knew how dangerous radiation was, and I still don't know if the government knew just how dangerous it was. But either way, we never wore any protection,” DePriest recollected.

Lack of protection and monitoring convinced DePriest to enroll in the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program (BTMed). “A lot of workers like me are being affected by what happened years ago without knowing where it's coming from,” he explained.

More than 2,500 Laborers across the country have participated in the BTMed program. It's a free and easy process that consists of two steps: a work history interview and a medical exam.

In step one, a work history interview is conducted to determine what exposures the former worker may have encountered. The interview can be completed in-person, on the telephone, or on a secured website.

In step two, the worker receives a free medical screening exam at a convenient location to test for illnesses that may have developed from work exposures, as well as other more common health problems. Following the exam, the participant receives a letter indicating any medical findings.

“The exam leaves no stone unturned,” DePriest said in praise of the BTMed program. “It was the first time in my life a doctor called me,” he remarked with a slight laugh. Unfortunately, the call was no laughing matter as it was in regards to x-ray results that would later be diagnosed as asbestosis. In this respect, DePriest is not alone: one of every four workers screened through BTMed has some evidence of lung disease. Today, his voice operates with 20 percent of the strength it once had. “You can't breathe. You can't talk,” he said faintly.

After being diagnosed with asbestosis, DePriest filed a claim with the U.S. Department of Labor under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act (EEOICPA). His claim was accepted, and compensation and medical benefits were awarded. Although the compensation doesn't heal his condition, DePriest is grateful he took advantage of the opportunity to get his health examined. “I've been back for a re-screening exam as well,” he mentioned. “If the BTMed program is going to offer me an exam every three years, there's no way I'm going to pass it up.”

But DePriest recognizes how easy it is to put off. This is why, having looked after his own health,
Dear Worker To Speak Up

Building Trades National Medical Screening Program

DePriest urges fellow DOE workers who have yet to be screened. "If you haven't gone in for your free screening, you better get on the ball. Hopefully you'll find out everything's alright, but if it isn't, you might catch a condition earlier than I did and be able to do something about it before it's too late. Conditions creep up on you, they don't turn up overnight."

DePriest's soft voice, forever weakened by asbestosis, is all you should ever need to hear before being told twice. After all, there's no guarantee it'll still be around to tell you again.

The BTMed Program is coordinated by CPWR - The Center for Construction Research and Training and supported by the Building & Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO.

If you have worked at one of the covered DOE/AEC Sites listed on the box (above), please contact the:

Building Trades National Medical Screening Program
1-800-866-9663
www.btmed.org

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—Charles DePriest, LIUNA Local 83