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The BEST Sponsor for our Mechanical Insulation Incentive Bill

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Congressman Bob Dold (R-Ill.)

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Congratulations to the 2015 Florence Bernard/Alta Miller Scholarship Recipients
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What you don't know might kill you

Retired Local 46 Member makes sure workers don't have hidden disease from long-term exposures

When Johnny Ballinger showed up at the Oak Ridge reservation in 1961 as a fresh-out-of-high-school asbestos worker, he started the job in a group of 28 insulators. They worked without coveralls, without respirators, without showering or changing clothes before going home to their families.

Their bosses said that asbestos wasn't dangerous. Of those 28 insulators that Johnny started working with, only two are alive today.

"We weren't stupid," he says bluntly. "We knew that asbestos would hurt us, but they didn't give us respirators when we started. We worked with no masks, no nothing."

While he can't change the fates of the workers who have already passed away from their exposure to hazardous materials while on the job at a DOE site, for the past 13 years, Johnny has been working with the BTMed program to provide free medical information to former DOE construction workers who are still alive.

Many workers do not realize that there are medical screening programs in place so that, as Johnny puts it, "(Workers can) make sure there's not something developing in their lungs or whatever that they don't know about. Something they might be able to catch early and take care of. So they can stay around

Retired asbestos worker Johnny Ballinger is now an interviewer with the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program (BTMed).

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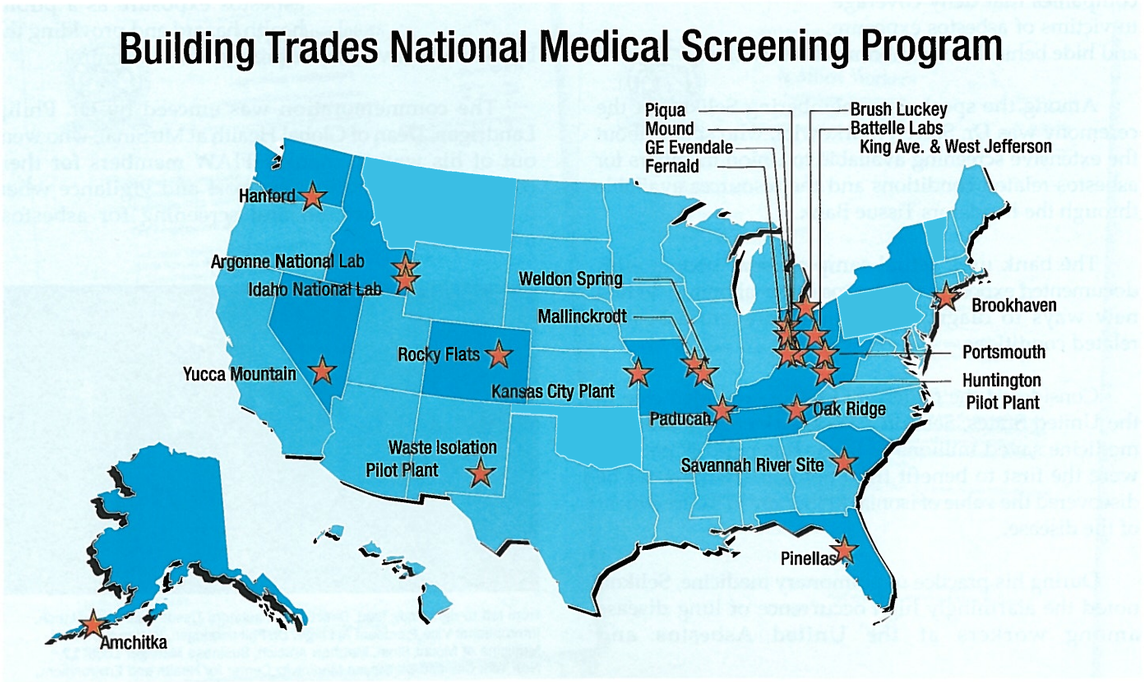


with their families and enjoy this life."

Often these workers don't show symptoms until it is too late for treatment.

The Building Trades National Medical Screening Program, or BTMed, offers free two-step medical screenings to former DOE construction workers. The first step is the work history interview; which Johnny takes point on at BTMed's Oak Ridge regional office.

"I know all of what was in those buildings, most of them," Johnny recalls. "So if (a worker) tells me they were in a building, I can ask them if they worked around certain things and that'll jog their memory."

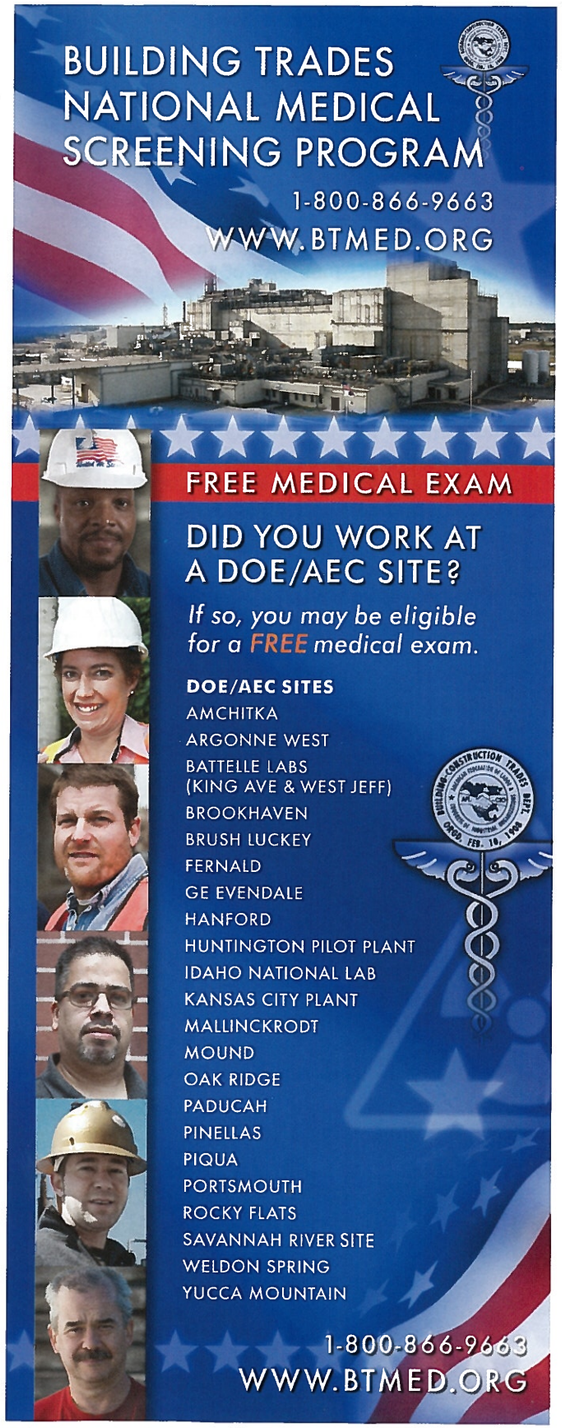
After the work history interview, participants go through a complete physical exam. The physical is informed by the work history interview, so examiners know exactly what kinds of symptoms to look for based on certain exposures. Workers may go through follow-up physical exams every three years, and some, including those who have worked with asbestos, may be eligible for special lung cancer screening.

Johnny remembers his first BTMed physical exam fondly. "I loved it," he said. "It was head to toe. Checked you for everything. I recommend it to anybody who wants to, they need to get it. Especially asbestos workers because asbestos has a latency period, and this rescreen you do every three years is a big deal for them. You know, (a disease) might not show up the first exam, it might show up the second exam."

Since he started working at BTMed in 2002, Johnny figures that he has helped screen over a thousand former DOE construction workers.

"If you worked at [a DOE site], you've been exposed," he warns. "There's no way around it."

As someone with asbestosis in both lungs and one amputated lobe, his message is an important one to follow. Because of how long it takes to feel the symptoms of illness from radiation, beryllium, lead, and other hazards that face construction workers, he stresses the importance of going in for multiple screenings.

"A lot of things you've been around might not show up the first time, but two or three years down the road it might."

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, please contact the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program at 1-800-866-9663 or visit www.btmed.org. If you worked at Oak Ridge, you can contact the outreach office directly at 865-481-0009.