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Hispanic Safety in the work place by

As a Hispanic, that's a naturalized US citizen I understand the challenges faced by Latinos working here. Even though I came to this country as former military officer with a college education, when I started in construction I was relegated to performing menial tasks as a day laborer due to my lack of English. Back then we barely used protective equipment. I can't recall any construction safety training until at least a decade later in the 90's. In fact, the first time I even wore a hard hat was in 1994.

At that time injuries were just considered part of the job, like a badge of courage that you were expected to "deal with" on your own. I often keep right on working with lacerations, broken fingers, contusions, even a serious knee injury. I was young and didn't want to "rock the boat" because my visa made my working status unclear. I also suffered from that stereotypical Hispanic machismo that "real men" don't complain. From my current perspective as a safety professional (that is still paying the price of those past injuries) I realize how fool hardy it is to risk your future health (perhaps even your life) by ignoring proper safety practices or avoiding medical attention in the misguided belief that, "the show must go on" at all costs. Now after decades of extensive safety training I realize that many of the injuries I suffered were due to the absence of proper safety programs. The recent "awakening" to the effects of dangerous working conditions throughout the construction industry is not unlike the current realization in the NFL of the long term effects of "on the job" injuries.

Over two decades ago I was injured on the job. Fortunately, I received treatment through workers compensation and got back to work. That early incident, made me focus on the safety aspects of subsequent assignments and began a personal quest to achieve mastery in the safety field. As a result I now have a degree in Environmental Management and hold numerous safety certifications. Today, I'm deeply involved in training workers, including Spanish immigrants. As explained by Bronchetti and McInerney (2012) Workers' Compensation (WC) insurance benefits, which cover the cost of medical care and lost wages for workers injured on the job, show that Hispanic workers are less likely to receive WC cash payments than whites or blacks. Inequities always seek balance, eventually.

Hispanics are particularly vulnerable because many of the jobs they're offered are the most dangerous occupations available including: construction laborers, health aides, janitors, housekeepers, production workers, and drivers, (Baron et al., 2013). The majority of the workforce that performs back breaking work every day in the US Agriculture Industry are Hispanics. The dairy industry also depends on them as do many other sectors. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Hispanic or Latino workers accounted for 19 percent of all fatal occupational injuries in the United States in 2015. In addition, Hispanic or Latino workers had a higher percentage of fatalities due to falls, 23 percent, compared with 17 percent for all workers.

I've been a Safety professional for over twenty years and have seen lots of positive changes in the way employers implement safety programs. OSHA has developed specific partnerships and programs for the protection of Latino workers which have contributed greatly to the awareness of the hazards that Hispanics face across many industries. Nevertheless, Hispanics are still very susceptible to being injured in the work place. I've found that Hispanic workers are unlikely to speak up for their interests in construction activities. This has led me to understand the great need for site orientation and safety training developed specifically for this ethnic group. In fact, this type of training is so essential to achieve clear communications between supervisors and their crews that it should be required for any health and safety program to be fully effective.

The Bureau of Statistics explains that: The Hispanic labor force has grown more than 600% over the past 40 years, from 4.3 million in 1976 to 26.8 million in 2016. (In contrast, the overall labor force, grew by less than 50%—from about 92 million in 1976 to 132 million in 2016.) The percentage of Hispanics in our labor force is projected to increase at a higher rate than any other ethnic group by 2026. Therefore, it's imperative that employers develop their Management Systems with Hispanics in mind. Spanish-speaking workers tend to learn faster from visually oriented training programs. However, most of the available training is still built around written lessons plans and testing methods. The integration of training videos accessible through a digital platform might result in better training and safer work sites which could save lives.

Hispanics are here to stay. They represent an important part of the American labor force. With the extensive infrastructure challenges we'll soon be facing the protection of our worker's health should be one of our top priorities. The numbers don't lie. Statistics show that Hispanics represent a growing percentage of this nation's workforce and as such are a vital part of our growing economy, worthy of protection.

