



Young Workers in California

A Critical Human Resource in Our Economy

by Chris Lee, WACA Safety Consultant

Each year, California teens and young people under 24 years of age enter the workforce through summer jobs, including part-time and full-time employment. Many are not aware of their employment rights or possible hazards in the workplace.

The California Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) and the California Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation (CHSWC) recognize these dangers and are dedicated to ensuring that all workers, including young workers, have a safe work environment. It's critical for new entrants in the labor force, especially in construction, to learn proper safety protocol to prevent injuries.

Injuries, Illnesses and Fatalities

Young workers are not immune to workplace hazards. Unfortunately, hazards will likely continue to result in occupational injuries, illnesses and fatalities for this demographic. The following two statistics should be noted; in the United States, every nine seconds, a teen worker is injured, and workers under the age of 25 are twice as likely to end up in the emergency room versus workers over 25 years of age.

Nationally, for the data year 2016, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in the construction industry there were 1,330 nonfatal

injuries among workers ages 16 to 19 and 9,340 nonfatal injuries among workers ages 20 to 24. Ten fatalities occurred among workers ages 18 to 19, and 58 fatalities occurred among workers ages 20 to 24.

In California, for the data year 2016, the bureau reported 350 nonfatal occupational injuries for workers ages 16 to 19 and 1,000 nonfatal occupational injuries for workers ages 20 to 24. Three fatalities occurred among workers ages 20 to 24.

Hazards and Environmental Factors

Young workers are injured or become sick on the job for many reasons, such as inadequate safety training, unsafe equipment, dangerous work that is illegal or inappropriate for youth under 18, and the pressure to work faster in stressful conditions. Other unsafe or unhealthy risks for young workers can occur from falls, machines and tools, hazardous materials, confined spaces, electricity, being struck by or backed over by a vehicle, and excessively loud noise.

Eight key factors contribute to unsafe or unhealthy exposures of young workers, including exposure to the sun, heat, landscaping, pesticides and chemicals, machinery and vehicles, electricity, heavy lifting, and excessively loud noise.

Restrictions on Workers Under the Age of 18

Workers under the age of 18 may not operate, clean or repair power-driven types of machinery, such as hoists, forklifts, circular saws and hand saws. In addition, they may not work on wrecking or demolition jobs, excavation projects, or roofing or work that involves going on or near the roof.

Facts for Employers – Safer Jobs for Young Workers

Contractors need to know the laws specific to California child labor. Teen employees cannot be assigned work schedules that violate the law or given prohibited job tasks, like operating heavy equipment or power tools. Businesses must understand and comply with the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (Cal/OSHA) workplace safety and health regulations, which are designed to protect all employees including teens from injury.

Teen employees must have work permits. Workers under 18 must apply for work permits at their school or school district before beginning a





new job. Work permits are not required for those who have graduated from high school or passed the high school equivalency exam.

Companies should stress safety to supervisors and ensure frontline supervisors who give teen workers their job assignments know the law. Supervisors should be encouraged to set a good example. They're in the best position to influence teen attitudes and work habits.

Safety and health programs must be established, and supervisors/managers are responsible for ensuring all jobs and work areas are free of hazards. The law requires the employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace. Under Cal/OSHA regulations, every workplace must have an Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP). Visit the following website for specific requirements for construction employers: www.dir.ca.gov/title8/1509.html.

Resources for Employers

Contractors, if you'd like more information about California young worker laws on safety, the following list offers resources on this topic.

- The California Partnership for Young Worker Health and Safety is a statewide task force that brings together government agencies and statewide organizations representing educators, employers, parents, job trainers and others. The partnership develops and promotes strategies to protect youth at work and serves as an advisory group. Visit the following website for more information: www.dir.ca.gov/youngworker/YoungWorkerPartnership.html.
- Youngworkers.org is a website with state and national scope that has information for teens, young workers, parents, teachers, job educators, employers and anyone who wants to learn more about the subject.

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- Young Worker Resource Centers can tap into the resources of the University of California Berkeley's Labor and Occupational Health Program (LOHP), as well as other resources within the Department of Industrial Relations. For more information, contact Diane Bush at dbush@berkeley.edu or (510) 643-2424. The centers provide:
 - Written materials on occupational health and safety and labor laws for youth
 - Youth leadership development
 - Awareness campaigns and media relations
 - Technical and research assistance
 - Referrals to state and local health and safety agencies
- The Cal/OSHA Consultation Service provides free safety and health services on a wide array of issues, including young workers and is not affiliated with the enforcement unit. Visit this website for more information: www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/consultation.html. Email inquiries can be sent to infocons@dir.ca.gov. Phone inquiries can be directed to (800) 963-9424.