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FOCUS ON EDUCATION CENTERS

OSHA's Training Institute Education Centers are gearing up to train more students than ever before at 35 locations nationwide.

By Jim Barnes

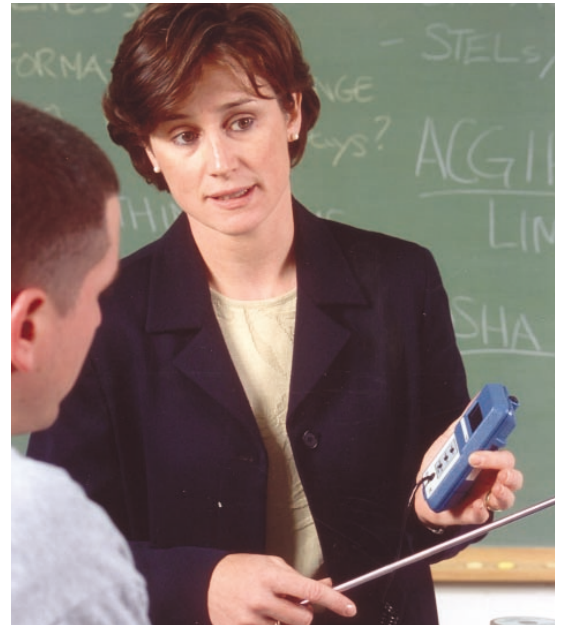
When the Department of Labor announced the selection of 20 OSHA Training Institute (OTI) Education Centers last December, it represented an exciting step forward for the program that delivers courses on OSHA standards and occupational safety and health issues to thousands of students a year.

By expanding the program from 12 to 20 centers at 35 locations throughout the United States, OSHA nearly doubled its capability to meet increasing demand for OSHA training. "More than 14,500 students were trained at education centers in 2002 alone," said Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao. "We expect the number of students trained by these centers to double over the next two years, and to continue to increase substantially each year after that."

The OTI Education Center program has come a long way since its establishment in October 1992. Then, as now, the OSHA Training Institute served as OSHA's primary training provider for federal and state compliance officers and state Consultation Program staff. The institute offered training to non-OSHA students on a space-available basis.

Throughout the 1980s, however, demand for training from private-sector employers and employees and staff of other federal agencies increased substantially, exceeding OTI's capacity.

This gave birth to an innovative solution:



Peter Finger

Dr. Melinda Treadwill teaches an industrial hygiene course at Keene State College in Manchester, N.H.

OSHA began teaming up with other training and educational institutions to conduct OTI courses at their facilities. The arrangement not only increased OTI's capability to provide important occupational safety and health training; it also delivered training closer to many of the students' worksites.

Initially, the program started with four education centers. Soon it expanded to include 12 centers, with at least one in each region.

Now, with 20 centers, OSHA Administrator John L. Henshaw said the program will have a greater impact than ever before. "Training is key to safety and health," he said. "Expanding our education centers allows us to reach more people with information that can protect their safety and save their lives."

From the start, the Education Center Program had strict requirements for its training facilities. OSHA conducts a national competition, evaluating competing institutions on a variety of factors: occupational safety and health experience, non-academic training background, classroom and laboratory availability, and the ability to provide training throughout the region, among them. The nonprofit organizations selected to provide the training receive no funding from OSHA, and support their OSHA training through tuition and fees.

Ron Mouw, deputy director of OSHA's Office of Training and Education, said the



An instructor at the National Safety Education Center brings safety and health training to DeKalb, Ill.

education centers enable OSHA to significantly expand its outreach without requiring additional funds or resources.

The education centers support OSHA's training and education mission through a variety of safety and health programs. In addition to providing basic courses that teach students to recognize, avoid, and prevent unsafe and unhealthful working conditions, the programs enhance the agency's community outreach efforts, including Spanish-language courses and youth initiatives.

Recognizing that not all students are able to attend the full-week courses, OTI and the education center staffs are developing several one-day seminars to address subjects such as the new ergonomic guidelines for nursing homes, homeland security, and machine guarding.

It's not unusual for staff at the education centers to lend their subject-matter expertise to curriculum development. The centers have been leaders in developing distance-learning courses and promoting safety and health training through their presence at conferences and seminars focusing on topics such as homeland security and ergonomics.

In addition, the centers offer something OTI isn't readily able to provide: specialized local instruction tailored to specific regional industry needs. The education centers work closely with OSHA regional and area offices to offer customized corporate training and on-site training courses, on request. For example, the National Safety Education Center (NSEC), an OTI center near Chicago, worked with the Illinois On-Site Consultation Service staff and local OSHA Area Offices to

present "Needlestick Provisions of the Bloodborne Pathogen Rule" to participants at multiple sites via interactive television.

NSEC has been very responsive to students' needs by offering training with unique scheduling options such as presenting courses on consecutive Fridays, to lessen the impact of missed workdays, and designing specialized programs for the warehousing industry and Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) participants.

These are some of the innovative approaches the OTI education centers are using to promote occupational safety and health initiatives. They add value for businesses and play a vital role in supporting OSHA's training objectives.

From its modest beginning in 1992, to a national network of training organizations offering a broad range of courses and subject matter expertise, the OTI Education Center Program has clearly exceeded initial expectations.

"Since the inception of the program in 1992, the OTI education centers have added great value in providing occupational safety and health training, and supporting our department's mission," said OTE Director Henry Payne. "With the recent expansion of the program, OSHA will continue to raise the bar on the number of students trained by our education centers. This will allow OSHA to reach more people as the agency endeavors to promote safety, reduce injury and illness, and ultimately, save lives."

Barnes is a program manager at the OSHA Training Institute in Arlington Heights, Ill.

For a list of OTI Education Centers and course offerings and dates, visit the OSHA website at www.osha.gov. Click on "Training."