

Foreign job force raises safety issues

A new program could teach English to Idaho's Hispanic construction workers.

"You need to wear a hard hat."

"That's a metal ladder."

"The footing is unstable."

Phrases like that can save lives on a construction site, but a growing number of construction workers in Idaho don't understand English.

The number of foreign-born construction workers in Idaho more than doubled from 2001 to 2004, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Amy Anderson, construction manager for Wilson Construction in Ketchum, runs a crew of about 20 men, about 15 of whom speak Spanish as their primary language.

"Safety is a huge concern on the job site," she said.

"Sometimes you say something to one of the guys, and they nod their head and do exactly what you didn't want them to do."

To improve communication on work sites, the Home Builders Institute, the training arm of the National Association of Home Builders, has developed a new tool.

The construction edition of Sed de Saber -which means "Thirst for Knowledge - is an interactive program designed to teach English to Spanish-speaking construction workers.

The institute launched the program last spring in Florida, and Idaho builders now have access to it.

HISPANICS IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Despite the slowdown in home building, the construction industry nationwide added 559,000 workers in 2006, according to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center released in March.

Of those new jobs, two of every three went to Hispanics, most of whom were foreign-born, the report said. And most of those jobs are in the West and South.

"It's hard work, it's dirty work," said Scott Kimball, developer of the Aspen lofts in Downtown Boise. "We do have a worker shortage."

The National Association of Home Builders has studied the labor shortage for years, said Steven Kramer, vice president of the Home Builders Institute.

"We're looking at ways to get American citizens into the industry, but it's a big challenge," Kramer said. "It's an industry of last resort for Americans. People think it's dirty."

Kramer acknowledged the presence of undocumented workers in the construction industry, "just like in every industry."



Idaho Statesman

Cyndie Woods, with the Residential Construction program at College of Southern Idaho, demonstrates a device used to help people Spanish-speaking construction workers learn construction terminology.

Builders aren't going to invest in an English-language teaching program for workers who may have to leave because of immigration issues, he said.

While the number of foreign-born workers on construction sites is rising, the wages of those workers is falling, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. The median earnings of foreign-born Hispanic workers dropped in 2006 to \$388 a week from \$400 in 2005, the March report said.

Wages for U.S.-born Hispanics rose to \$428 a week from 2005 to 2006.

Hispanic construction workers overall still have the lowest median wage of any racial or ethnic group, the center reported.

"There are certain levels in construction where you have to have an education and experience - electrical, plumbing," Kimball said. "But the other ones - laying concrete, shoveling dirt - they're not the highest-paying."

The glass ceiling hangs low for Hispanics in construction, according to a national survey in April by FMI, a management consulting and investment banking firm. Of the managers who responded, 92 percent said they were Caucasian and not Hispanic, the survey reported.

The survey did not say how many of those Caucasians spoke Spanish.

WHY DON'T WORKERS LEARN ENGLISH?

Some local builders have considered learning Spanish.

"There are more Spanish speakers on construction sites than ever," said Corey Barton, one of the Treasure Valley's largest home builders. "We want those workers, and we want to be able to talk to them. They are skillful, and they do work hard - hard and long."

Many workers want to learn English, but learning a second language as an adult requires time, patience and money. Full-time workers often don't have the time to study. When they can make the time, the language they're taught may be irrelevant to their jobs.

"There's not that many programs out there for people who want to learn," said Claudia Peralta Nash, chairwoman of the department of bilingual education at Boise State University. "If you contextualize a language with their interests, their concerns, ... then you have them hooked."

That's exactly what the Home Builders Institute is trying to do.

In collaboration with Retention Education Inc., the institute created Sed de Saber, which models a program designed in 2005 for hotel and restaurant workers.

The program contains a series of seven books, written at a third-grade reading level by construction industry professionals.

Sed de Saber teaches 500 vocabulary words and 340 phrases, most of which - like nails, measuring tape and "he's hanging drywall" - are industry-specific.

Participants also learn in English how to open a bank account, shop for groceries and find community services.

The seventh book focuses solely on federal safety standards.

A Quantum LeapPad interactive toy instructs participants in Spanish and records their responses in English.

"It's like a children's toy because in many families, it's the children who are learning English and can help the parents," said Sue Woodyard, a Ketchum representative of the Home Builders Institute.

Learners can record their voices as many times as they want until they are satisfied. The repetition should help boost their self-confidence, an important aspect of learning a new language.

"I know people who can speak English but cannot speak English in front of other people because of embarrassment," Peralta Nash said.

In about four months, learners should be able to understand and speak English at a third-grade level.

Pulte Homes, a national home-building company, ran a pilot program in Las Vegas that graduated about a dozen students.

"When you put the right people in the program, the results are astounding," said Kari Lawry, Pulte's national director of diversity and college recruiting. "They begin sharing their thoughts with others and their supervisor that they wouldn't have. Talk about capturing ideas."

The company likes Sed de Saber because employees learned words and phrases they could use the same day, Lawry said.

SED DE SABER'S RECEPTION IN IDAHO

The Idaho Building Contractors Association endorses Sed de Saber, although the program is so new to Idaho it hasn't been tried here yet.

"It's a great idea," said Frankie Hickman-Rice, executive vice president of the organization. "It will go through our education committee, and they'll look at how we can use it."

Anderson, the construction manager in Ketchum, was introduced to Sed de Saber in early December.

"I thought it was a great, great idea," she said. "Not being able to communicate is frustrating to me. And if I can provide something that enhances someone's life, I think we should do it."