

TO: Iowa Worker's Compensation Advisory Committee

FROM: Carrie Wilbert, PhD Student, University of Iowa 2019-2020 William E. Riley Graduate Research Assistant

DATE: August 27, 2020

RE: 2019-2020 Workers' Compensation research project

The William E. Riley assistantship for the year 2019-2020 provided significant funding and support for work on the first phase of a qualitative research project that involved transdisciplinary efforts of the University of Iowa Labor Center (College of Law), College of Medicine, and College of Education (Rehabilitation Counselor Education). The project was approved by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board and is titled "Service Providers' Perceptions of the Injured Immigrant Experience in the Iowa Workers Compensation System." The research assistant, Carrie Wilbert, MS, worked closely with Principal Investigator, Dr. Claudia Corwin, MD, MPH and the Director of the Labor Center, Dr. Jennifer Sherer, PhD, in the design and implementation of this project.

The project was developed to answer two research questions that flowed from the interest of medical practitioners in assessing immigrant workers' experiences with workplace injuries and systems outside the medical context that might affect health outcomes, and multi-party interests in assessing immigrant worker encounters with legal, communication, health care, or other services following a workplace injury. The research questions were:

1. How do professionals who work within the Iowa Workers' Compensation System (IWCS), and provide assistance to injured immigrant workers, perceive the experience of injured immigrant workers within the IWCS?
2. What do these professionals need with respect to resources and tools in order to better support injured immigrant workers?

Research participants were chosen for their experience in providing services to injured immigrants in the course of their work within the IWCS. Participants consisted of labor leaders, physicians who specialize in occupational medicine, and attorneys in private practice representing injured workers. We are hopeful that additional funding can be secured for the next

phase of planned research, intended to capture stories from injured immigrant workers themselves.

A short literature review assisted in the development of the research question. Existing literature supported that Iowa has a growing immigrant community, and as of 2017 more than 5 percent of Iowa residents were immigrants (Immigrants in Iowa, 2017). Immigrants are increasingly vital members of the Iowa labor force who work in a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, accommodation and food services, education and construction. The greatest number of immigrant workers are in production and manufacturing related work (Immigrants in Iowa, 2017), which often include the most dangerous and low paying jobs in the local economy. In the United States and internationally, fatal and non-fatal injuries and illnesses occur at higher rates among immigrant workers (Byler & Robinson, 2018). Higher immigrant work-related injury rates represent an increasingly important contribution to health disparities in North America (Kosny et al., 2012).

After confirming the absence of prior research on immigrants in Iowa's workers' compensation system, the team decided to conduct an initial year-long qualitative study, interviewing a sample of expert service providers who work within the IWCS. The research assistant's work consisted of co-planning the project which included gaining IRB approval, developing standardized interview questions, coordinating and interviewing the service providers, and developing a system to code the data.

The next phase of this project will be the coding and analysis of the interviews. It is anticipated that findings from the interviews will illustrate the unique challenges that injured immigrants experience in the Iowa Workers Compensation System. These challenges may include language barriers, lack of knowledge of the US labor system and/or the Workers' Compensation System in particular, fears related to immigration status, and lack of familiarity with or access to US

healthcare systems. Based only on preliminary review of the interviews, broadly apparent themes include identification of systemic challenges that include:

- language barriers and related lack of access to high-quality translation or interpretation services
- lack of knowledge of US employment or legal system generally, and the workers' compensation system in particular
- lack of accessible information on support services from employers and the healthcare system.

Interviews with participants were punctuated by poignant statements that anecdotally illustrate these points, for example:

- “Uh, they don't. They don't know at all. They know there's some laws in the United States of America that protects them, but they don't know there's a protection there on the job, on the field.” (labor leader, male, Latino)
- “You know, that they feel that as an immigrant they won't have labor rights. The labor laws don't protect them here. They think that they're illegal, which that's one of the things we spend a lot of time on is educating them as workers, they are, no matter what their status is they're protected under labor laws and workers' compensation, so... I think that'd be the biggest challenge is educating the immigrant worker about the, the labor laws and what they're, what they're protected under.” (labor leader, male, White)

Concomitantly, interviews suggest that service providers across multiple domains observe positive impacts on injured immigrant workers who access specific forms of support from labor organizations or community organizations that specialize in serving immigrant populations and/or are equipped to communicate in multiple languages. The majority of service providers interviewed indicated that they have limited capacity to provide such support within their assigned roles, and that less than 10% of their work engages directly with immigrant workers (reflecting demographics of Iowa and/or the

workplaces they serve), identifying a need to make specific forms of education and resources more broadly available to medical and legal professionals within the IWCS who will increasingly be called on to serve injured immigrant workers.

References

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