

AUPOHS

ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS IN
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Testimony to the
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education

Submitted by:
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On behalf of
The Association of University Programs in Occupational Health and Safety
(AUPOHS)

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Summary:

The following is a written transcript of oral testimony with regard to the FY 2005 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill, in support of increased and continued funding for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and for the NIOSH-funded Education and Research Centers.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Dr. Jacqueline Agnew. I am the director of the Education & Research Center for Occupational Health & Safety at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and I am here on behalf of the Association of University Programs in Occupational Health and Safety. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the Subcommittee in support of the importance of continued funding for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and for the NIOSH-funded Education and Research Centers (ERCs).

You are all familiar with the work of Constantino Brumidi, the artist who spent the end of his life painting the beautiful historical frieze that encircles the base of the Capitol dome. Mr. Brumidi worked on those paintings until he lost consciousness the day before he died in 1880. To quote from the Senate Web site¹:

When he began painting the frieze Brumidi was seventy-two years old; debilitated by asthma, chronic diarrhea, and other ailments; and working under extremely difficult conditions. After ascending a long flight of stairs, the white-haired artist had to climb over the balcony under the windows and descend a long ladder to the small scaffold dangling almost sixty feet above the Rotunda floor.

A treacherous job, you might say – and you’d be right. One day, while he was halfway through painting the eighth scene, Brumidi’s chair slipped out from under him and he was thrown over the edge of the scaffold. As the story goes, he managed to catch a hold of the ladder attached to the scaffold, and he dangled there for a full 15 minutes before he was rescued. The following day was Brumidi’s last full day of work on the dome frieze, and he died a few months later. It was reported in the newspaper that he “never recovered from the shock occasioned by his fall.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly the type of worker injury that our NIOSH-supported ERC programs help to prevent – whether they’re here under the Capitol dome, whether they’re in a city skyscraper, or whether they’re in a silo on a Midwestern farm. The 16 ERCs are regional resources for all parties charged with protecting worker health and safety – in industry, labor, government, academia, and in the general public – and the ERCs work to help the nation reduce losses associated with work-related illnesses and injuries. ERCs do this through professional training, research training, continuing education and regional outreach that focuses on prevention.

The many causes of occupational injury and illness represent a striking burden on America’s health and well-being. And despite significant improvements in workplace safety and health over the last several decades:

- There were 5,524 occupational fatalities in 2002, for an average of 15 workers per day who died from work-related injuries;
- In that same year, more than 4.7 million workers sustained work-related injuries and illnesses in the private sector alone;
- The economic toll of work-related illness and injuries on the nation’s employers, workers and their families, and society overall reached almost \$46 billion in 2001 – with another \$137 to \$229 billion in indirect costs!

¹ www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate/brumidi, page 164.

- To put this in perspective, these costs dwarf the \$33 billion for AIDS and the \$67 billion for Alzheimer's Disease, and they are greater than the \$164 billion economic cost for all circulatory diseases and the \$171 billion cost of cancer. Yet federal support for occupational safety and health research pales in comparison – for example, cancer research receives 17 times as much federal funding!

Furthermore, the rapidly changing workplace continues to present new health risks to American workers, and our workforce itself is changing. By 2005, one-third of the U.S. workforce will be 45 years or older. Work-injury fatality rates begin increasing at age 45, with rates for workers 65 years and older being nearly three times as high as the average for all workers. (Like the painter Brumidi, older workers are at higher risk.) But despite being the primary federal agency for occupational disease and injury prevention, NIOSH receives only about one dollar per worker per year for its mission of professional education, research and outreach.

The heightened awareness of terrorist threats, and the increased responsibilities of first responders and other homeland security professionals, illustrates the need to strengthen workplace health and safety. The NIOSH ERCs play a crucial role in preparing Occupational Safety and Health professionals, employers and workers to increase readiness to respond to biological, chemical or radiological attacks. In the face of the growing concerns surrounding homeland security, ERCs have rapidly upgraded research coordination and expanded training opportunities, including sponsoring national and regional forums on response to bioterrorism and other disasters.

Thanks to your previous support for occupational health and safety research, NIOSH developed more effective methods to test for anthrax contamination in congressional offices. These procedures were quickly adopted by the Coast Guard, the FBI and government building contractors.

In addition, occupational health and safety professionals have worked for several years with emergency response teams to minimize losses in the event of a disaster. NIOSH took a lead role in protecting the safety of emergency responders in New York City and Virginia, with ERC-trained professionals applying their technical expertise and conducting activities to safeguard the health of clean-up workers.

NIOSH is now building even further on these efforts by launching *Research to Practice*, or *r2p*, a new initiative to transfer research findings, technologies and information into effective prevention practices and products and to promote their adoption in workplaces.

AUPOHS requests an increase of \$5 million for ERCs, and we are supporting a \$30 million total increase over the \$277 million appropriated in FY04 for NIOSH. This funding for NIOSH and the ERCs would help reduce the staggering burden of occupational illnesses and injuries on the American economy. Our recommendation would ensure that NIOSH can continue to work to achieve its goal of preventing work-related illnesses and injuries, and that our nation's universities have the capacity and manpower to implement important workplace safety initiatives and to expand training programs to improve the health and productivity of American workers.

Thank you.