

NYCOSH Recognizes Those Who Go Extra Mile on Job Safety

By SARAH DORSEY | Posted: Monday, June 16, 2014 5:30 pm

Two organizers who worked for years to protect the health of Sept. 11 survivors were honored June 12 at the annual New York Committee for Occupational Safety & Health awards dinner, along with an investigative reporter and other dogged defenders of worker health.



Spencer_Robert

Robert Spencer, the longtime media director of the Organization of Staff Analysts, began raising alarms about 9/11 worker health concerns just weeks after the terrorist attacks. In 2004, he helped ensure that 90 Church Street, what NYCOSH called a “massively contaminated” building housing several public-agency offices near the World Trade Center, went through intensive health and safety improvements before reopening. He made sure that double windows were installed, the air-filtration system was high-efficiency, and the air was monitored regularly.

Stickler for Collaboration

Mr. Spencer helped bring community and labor representatives together to fight for 9/11 health needs, getting members of the 90 Church Street advocacy group he helped found into a community-labor coalition formed in 2004. He later served on an advisory committee for the World Trade Center Environmental Health Center, representing workers whose health was threatened even though they weren't first responders.

He noted that collaboration between labor, community and environmental advocates had been essential during his 12-year-long fight.

“In a time of diminished support for labor in the broader society, health and safety issues can be a potent source of solidarity,” he said.

Mr. Spencer often worked alongside Kimberly Flynn, who chaired the WTC Health Program's Survivors Steering Committee. Ms. Flynn received the Karen Silkwood award, which goes to a rank-and-file safety activist. A longtime activist for diverse causes from student protests to AIDS advocacy, she helped form a group called 9/11 Environmental Action, which pressed repeatedly for Environmental Protection Agency testing and clean-up of World Trade Center contaminants around lower Manhattan.

Ms. Flynn said that the WTC Environmental Health Center advisory committee was “committed to protecting environmental and occupational health as two facets of the same essential struggle.”

Honors Longtime Leader

NYCOSH also honored its former Executive Director Joel Shufro, who stepped down from the role in January after holding it for 34 years.

Mr. Shufro rose to lead the organization in 1980, after helping to quash a Federal bill that would have curbed the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration's enforcement powers. During his tenure, NYCOSH raised enough funds to hire a professional staff, expanded to three local offices and gained more than 200 local unions as members.

It also ran campaigns that helped establish a network of occupational health clinics in the state and a training program in hazard abatement. After Sept. 11, the non-profit helped organize a community-labor coalition to fight for proper cleanup of downtown homes and businesses.

Mr. Shufro, who holds a Ph.D in American history and a master's in occupational safety and health, has received several awards, including both the Tony Mazzocchi and Lifetime Achievement Awards from the national Committee for Occupational Safety & Health, and the Man of the Year Award from the advisory board of the Mt. Sinai Irving J. Selikoff Centers for Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Mulgrew's Work Cited

United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew was awarded for his work with that union, including safety and health advocacy. Mr. Mulgrew pressed the Department of Education to speed up its disposal of PCB-containing lighting fixtures in schools and reorganized his union's safety and health department to better address safety concerns.

NYCOSH also honored Jim Morris, the managing editor of the environment and labor reporting team at the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C. Mr. Morris has won more than 60 awards for his investigative reporting, including numerous series exposing occupational health and safety hazards. In April 2013, his series "Hard Labor" received the Edgar A. Poe award for national reporting from the White House Correspondents' Association. Previous investigations included a series on silicosis among sandblasters, a piece on chemical industry suppression of studies on carcinogens, and a global study of the asbestos industry that won two national awards.

Bhairavi Desai was awarded for her work organizing city taxi drivers since 1996. The co-founder and executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, Ms. Desai helped win benefits for the group's largely-immigrant membership, including increasing their incomes by 35 to 45 percent, securing free and cheap legal help, and \$15 million in emergency aid.

"For drivers, neither income nor safety of life are protected," Ms. Desai said.