

Pennsylvania sanitation workers face risk from discarded needles

Throughout the U.S., millions of Americans use injectable needles to treat a wide range of chronic illnesses. The needle pricks that help keep these people alive and well could prove dangerous for sanitation workers who pick up and sort our garbage. When not properly disposed of, needles can stick these workers, creating a risk of HIV, hepatitis and other diseases and leading to months of testing and medical treatment.

The problem, according to an article in the Bucks County Courier Times, is that workers rarely know where the needle came from and why it was used. A site manager for the sanitation company Waste Management says a needle could have been used by a person who needs insulin for diabetes, or by someone with HIV – which could have far more serious consequences for workers.

A waste management spokesman told the newspaper that workers who are stuck are given a medical evaluation and follow-up evaluations over the course of a year. If a worker does contract an infectious disease, treatment is also given.

The state of Pennsylvania advises people who use needles at home to dispose of them in a heavy plastic container, such as a detergent bottle. These bottles must be placed in the trash and not recycling. If a bottle with needles is placed in recycling, it could expose workers who sort through recycling because the bottles are crushed open during the sorting process.

Needle pricks are far from the only dangers faced by sanitation workers. An April 2013 article in The Atlantic

found that the fatality rate of sanitation workers is twice as high as police officers and almost seven times as high as firefighters.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the most common job-related hazards for employees include:

- Transportation accidents such as collisions and rollovers
- Being struck by other motorists
- Being struck by or caught in equipment and other contact with objects and equipment
- Overexertion
- Lifting injuries

Sanitation workers who are injured on the job – whether from an illness from a contaminated needle or a truck accident – are eligible for workers' compensation for medical care, wage replacement and other benefits.

Sources: The Atlantic, "[The Secret World of 'Garbage Men,'](#)" Heather Horn, April 1, 2013; NIOSH Fact Sheet, "[Solid Waste Industry](#)" March 2012; Bucks County Courier Times, "Sanitation workers face prickly problem," Peg Quann, Sept. 2, 2014, excerpt available online as "Sanitation workers stuck by loose needles."