

# Worker Safety During Cleanup and Recovery From Hurricanes Irma, Harvey, and Maria

*All workers have a right to a safe workplace, even after natural disasters, such as hurricanes. [The Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#) requires employers to provide their employees with safe working conditions. Workers involved in post-hurricane cleanup can face serious risks to their health and safety. Therefore, it is important for everyone involved in cleanup efforts to be aware of the dangers they may face, and understand what protections to take. It's also important for workers to understand their rights. This fact sheet provides an overview of hazards workers may face during post-hurricane cleanup and a summary of worker rights under the Occupational Safety and Health Act and workers' compensation laws.*

## Potential Worker Hazards During Hurricane Cleanup and Recovery

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### Mold

Mold is often found in buildings that have been flooded. Mold grows on moist and wet surfaces and can be hazardous to your health. Mold can cause infections, allergy symptoms and produce toxins. Workers involved in clean up or other construction work in mold contaminated areas must be provided with a N-95 NIOSH approved disposable respirator, at a minimum. For workers doing actual mold removal, there are stricter requirements for protection—including using disposable clothing, long gloves, goggles, and a more protective respirator. See OSHA's fact sheet on mold in the additional resources section for more information on required protections if a worker is involved in removing mold.



*Figure 1: A N-95 NIOSH approved disposable respirator.*

### Floodwaters

Floodwaters are often mixed with untreated sewage that may contain dangerous bacteria, and they may also contain hazardous agricultural and industrial chemicals. All workers involved in cleanup of flood contaminated areas should be up to date with a tetanus shot. If workers are in a building or area that was flooded, they must be provided with water proof boots, latex or rubber gloves, and other protective clothing needed to avoid skin contact with floodwater. Having good hygiene is critical in preventing sickness due to contact with articles contaminated from floodwater. It is important for workers to wash their hands with soap and water after flood cleanup activities, and before preparing or eating food.

## **Structural Damage**

Hurricane forces may have caused structural damage to buildings, which can pose serious risk of injury and death. If working in buildings with structural damage, workers must be provided with hard hats and safety goggles. Before work is conducted in buildings with structural damage, it should be inspected to make sure they are safe. If you smell natural gas, the worksite should be evacuated, and no one should be allowed to reenter the work area until the employer certifies that the source of gas has been cut off and the area is well ventilated.

## **Electrical Danger**

If there are downed power lines, always assume that they are live (energized). OSHA requires that workers stay at least ten feet from all downed lines and that the employer establishes and clearly marks a danger zone around downed lines. Only properly trained and equipped workers can be sent in to repair electrical wires.

## **Protection From Falls and Holes in Floors**

OSHA requires that workers are provided with fall protection systems—such as safety harnesses and lines that are attached to secure anchor points, when working on roofs or surfaces that are more than six feet high. In addition to fall protection systems, all floor openings must be guarded or covered. See the additional resources section below for more information on OSHA requirements for fall protection.

## **Wet Floors**

Slippery or uneven working surfaces may cause serious injuries. Employers must keep floors as clean and dry as possible.

## **Confined Spaces**

Workers may encounter spaces in buildings or homes or other areas that have limited means of access and present suffocation hazards. These spaces may be oxygen deficient and/or contain toxic or combustible gasses. These are spaces that are not designed for continuous occupancy and any work in such a space may require special training, testing for oxygen and toxic gasses, and a permit. See the additional resources section for more information.

## **Trench Safety**

Working in a trench can be deadly: In 2016 almost two workers a month were killed in unsafe trenches. Cave-ins pose the greatest threat. OSHA clearly says: “One cubic yard of soil can weigh as much as a car. An unprotected trench is an early grave. Do not enter an unprotected trench.” To protect workers, OSHA requires that all trenches five feet deep or greater must have a protective system such as trench box, shielding, shoring, or sloping to prevent cave-ins. In addition, all trenches four feet or deeper must have a ladder or other safe way for workers to exit the trench. See OSHA’s fact sheet on trench safety in the additional resources section.

## **Portable Generators**

Portable generators can be hazardous and even fatal—and must only be used in well-ventilated areas. They should not be run in a house or in an enclosed space like a garage, as the carbon monoxide produced from its exhaust may cause serious injury or death. Portable

generators not used appropriately may cause fires or expose workers to shocks, electrocution, or hearing loss.

### **Asbestos and Silica**

Asbestos is an extremely dangerous fiber that may be present in old buildings, such as in thermal system insulations or pipe wrapping. Exposure to asbestos may result in chronic lung disease and cancer. If insulation is present, workers should immediately inquire if it contains asbestos. If so, the employer must follow specific worker protection requirements set in the OSHA asbestos standard, including the provision and use of the proper choice of respirator, protective clothing, and training. You must have all these protections to do any work around asbestos. See the additional resources section for more information on required protections from asbestos.

Workers involved in cutting cement or brick work can be exposed to deadly silica dust and employers must follow the requirements of the OSHA standard on silica, which requires protection such as a respirator, or the use of wet cutting equipment that reduces dust. See the section on additional resources for more information.

### **Toxic Chemical Sites**

Only highly trained workers with proper personal protective equipment are allowed to clean up toxic chemicals, hazardous waste, or mold.

### **Workers' Rights**

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All workers have a right to a safe workplace, including the right to raise safety concerns with their employer. Workers also have the right to request an OSHA inspection if they believe there are serious hazards to their health and safety or that their employer is not following OSHA standards. Complaints can be filed [online](#), by mail, or by calling the closest OSHA regional or area office (1-800-321-OSHA). Complaints that are signed by workers or a representative (a worker center organizer, clergy, or union, for example) are more likely to result in an on-site inspection. If a worker requests, OSHA will keep their name confidential. Contact a local worker center for further assistance on filing a complaint with OSHA. See the additional resources section for more information.

Note: It is illegal under the OSHA law for employers to retaliate against workers for raising a safety concern, reporting an injury, or for filing an OSHA complaint. If an employer retaliates against a worker for using any of their rights under the law, contact OSHA immediately. Complaints of retaliation must be made to OSHA within 30 days of the alleged reprisal. To contact OSHA call 1-800-321-OSHA (6742).

If workers are injured at work, their medical bills and some portion of any lost wages should be covered by workers' compensation in their state. Workers' compensation is a state-run system where covered employers are either self-insured or buy insurance to provide workers benefits. In Florida and Puerto Rico, almost all employers are required to carry workers' compensation insurance coverage. In Texas, it is not required for employers to carry workers' compensation insurance (though many employers do). Therefore, in Texas, if an employer has not elected to obtain workers' compensation insurance, workers will need

to consult with an attorney and get compensation by suing the employer. Contact a local worker center for help in finding a workers' compensation attorney.

The workers' compensation statutes in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico prohibit retaliation or discrimination for filing a workers' compensation claim. Additionally, OSHA protects injured workers' right to report an injury to their employer. If a worker is retaliated against for filing for workers' compensation, file a discrimination complaint with the local workers' compensation board and an OSHA complaint immediately upon learning of the retaliation (see above information). See additional resources for a link to state workers' compensation laws and administration.

**Worker Centers:**

Texas	<p><b>Fe y Justicia Worker Center</b>          1805 W. Alabama St., Houston, TX 77098          (713) 862-8222  <a href="http://www.houstonworkers.org">www.houstonworkers.org</a></p> <p><b>Workers Defense Project</b>          2506 Sutherland St., Houston, TX 77023          (832) 998-0564  <a href="http://www.workersdefense.org">www.workersdefense.org</a></p> <p><b>Fuerza del Valle</b>          (956) 283-5650  <a href="http://www.fuerzadelvalle.org">www.fuerzadelvalle.org</a></p>
Florida	<p><b>Miami Worker Center</b>          8330 Biscayne Blvd, Miami, FL 33138          (305) 759-8717  <a href="http://www.miamiworkerscenter.org">www.miamiworkerscenter.org</a></p> <p><b>South Florida IWJ</b>          13727 SW 152 St. PMB 256, Miami, FL 33177          (786) 264-1708  <a href="http://www.sfiwj.org">www.sfiwj.org</a></p>
Puerto Rico	<p><b>Taller Salud</b>          (787) 876-3440  <a href="http://www.tallersalud.org">www.tallersalud.org</a></p>

**Additional Resources**

- OSHA Fact Sheet: Keeping Workers Safe During Disaster Cleanup and Recovery, available at: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3698.pdf>.
- OSHA Quick Card: [Mold](#), available at <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3691.pdf>.

- OSHA Fact Sheet on protections required for cleaning up [Mold](#), available at <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3713.pdf>
- OSHA publication on fall protection: <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3146.pdf>
- National COSH and New York COSH: Health Effects of Mold Exposure, available at [http://nycosh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Health-Effects-of-Mold-Exposure\\_083117-draft.pdf](http://nycosh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Health-Effects-of-Mold-Exposure_083117-draft.pdf).
- Filing Whistleblower Complaints under Section 11(c) of the OSH Act of 1970, available at [https://www.whistleblowers.gov/complaint\\_page](https://www.whistleblowers.gov/complaint_page)
- Information on Filing OSHA complaints: <https://www.osha.gov/workers/>
- Protecting Injured Immigrant Workers From Retaliation, <http://www.nelp.org/publication/protecting-injured-immigrant-workers-from-retaliation>.
- OSHA: Confined Spaces, <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/confinedspaces>.
- Falling Off Ladders Can Kill: Use Them Safely—Booklet ([PDF](#)), available at <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3625.pdf>.
- OSHA Fact Sheet: Trenching and Excavation Safety, available at: [https://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data\\_Hurricane\\_Facts/trench\\_excavation\\_fs.pdf](https://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_Hurricane_Facts/trench_excavation_fs.pdf).
- Asbestos: Information on Hazards and Required Protection from OSHA: <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/asbestos/index.html>
- Silica: Information on Hazards and Required Protection from OSHA: <https://www.osha.gov/dsg/topics/silicacrystalline/index.html>
- Workers' Compensation State Directory: <http://www.nelp.org/workers-comp-law-resources/>