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TESTIMONY OF DAVID J. SCHLEIN

before the

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL  
COMMITTEE ON CONSUMER AND REGULATORY AFFAIRS  
on

BILL 8-163  
"THE SAFE INDOOR AIR ACT OF 1989"  
JUNE 7, 1989

TO DO FOR ALL THAT WHICH NONE CAN DO FOR ONESELF

TCAL0055908

TESTIMONY OF DAVID J. SCHLEIN  
before the  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL  
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JUNE 7, 1989

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today about the "Indoor Safe Air Act of 1989," authored by Chairman John Ray. I serve as the National Vice President of the American Federation of Government Employees, District 14. On behalf of the 6,000 District of Columbia government employees represented by AFGE, I applaud Chairman Ray's legislation and his efforts to ensure a workplace free from the hazard and threat of radon and the tragic effects it can have on office workers.

Protecting the health and safety of all workers historically has been a top priority for organized labor. The growing problem of poor indoor air quality and the increasing presence of radon and radon progeny contaminating the air office workers breathe is of great concern to our union.

Radon is a problem that affects every region of our country. Building occupants, from students to government workers, are regularly exposed to radon and other toxic substances in the air.

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This past March, as part of the Safe Workplace Air Coalition, AFGE released the preliminary results of a survey of federal and District of Columbia government employees. Almost three-quarters of the 1000 respondents to that survey believe poor indoor air quality is a problem in their workplace. More than 90 percent reported suffering from symptoms often associated with poor indoor air quality.

Responses were received from workers at several agencies of the District of Columbia government, including the Departments of Employment Services, Public Works and the Department of Recreation.

Our experience has shown us that there is an indoor air quality problem in D.C. government buildings and that is why I am pleased to note that the "Indoor Safe Air Act of 1989" calls for civic responsibility and accountability on the part of the District of Columbia government. Section 5 (c) of the "Indoor Safe Air Act of 1989" would require buildings owned or leased by the District of Columbia government to be tested for radon gas and radon progeny and abatement procedures enacted should testing reveal unacceptable levels of radon.

Passage of the "Indoor Safe Air Act of 1989" will serve to protect D.C. residents and workers from exposure to radon gas.

Many District office workers assume they are safe from the

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traditional occupational health threats posed by the industrial worksite. Unfortunately, without knowing it, they may be risking their health by exposing themselves to dangerous levels of toxic substances such as radon.

Because radon gas is odorless, colorless and occurs naturally, it is a hazard that can be easily ignored. It is found everywhere at low levels but can become toxic when trapped indoors.

Like other indoor air pollutants, radon accumulates to dangerous levels when it seeps into a closed environment such as a home or office building, with no escape route. Without proper ventilation to allow radon and other contaminants to escape, office buildings can become dangerous environments.

The evidence is clear and convincing that the majority of indoor air quality problems are related directly to the design, operation, maintenance or modification of a building's ventilation or air handling system. Of the 356 building air quality studies completed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, more than half of the problems reported were related to inadequate air flow or lack of ventilation. Other studies estimate that as many as two-thirds of all indoor air quality complaints are the direct result of poor ventilation.

This is particularly a problem in modern, energy efficient, "tight" buildings. Almost all air flow in these buildings has been eliminated to conserve energy. Tightly closed windows and double-insulated walls and ceilings help keep the heat in, but do not allow for natural ventilation or the circulation of healthy amounts of fresh air. As a result, the majority of outside air supplied to these buildings enters through re-circulating air conditioning systems.

Unfortunately, in both the new energy efficient buildings and in older buildings, managers and owners frequently do not provide for proper upkeep of the air circulation and ventilation systems. This lack of maintenance allows outside air pollutants to be drawn into and recirculated throughout the building. Additionally, contaminants that originate inside the building, such as radon, are not filtered out, but are recirculated and become health hazards.

Office workers suffer from an additional complication. Often they work in overcrowded conditions that strain already inadequate or improperly maintained ventilation systems beyond capacity.

Obviously, one of the best solutions to the problem of radon and all indoor air pollution is proper ventilation. Making sure the ventilation system is equipped to serve the building design and use is the first step in assuring a clean workplace

for office workers. Proper ventilation will not only decrease the amount of exposure to radon, but it will also help eliminate a whole host of contaminants that are cited as frequent culprits in poor indoor air quality.

In the near future our union hopes to work with the Council in introducing legislation which will address the health hazards associated with other harmful toxins that can contaminate indoor air and threaten the health of workers.

It is important that the government of the nation's capital city provide progressive leadership on radon gas and indoor air quality issues. The rest of the nation, both the public and private sectors, will benefit by this committee's efforts on the radon bill.

We at the American Federation of Government Employees are doing all we can to secure a safe and healthy workplace for the men and women we represent. Again, I commend the Chairman and the committee for your attention to this important health issue and thank you for inviting me to speak to you. I will be glad to answer any questions.

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