

American Federation of
Government Employees
District 14

National Energy
Management Institute

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POOR AIR QUALITY IN GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS IS WIDESPREAD

Survey Finds Relationship To High Absenteeism Among Federal Employees

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Many federal and D.C. government employees are suffering from poor indoor air quality in their workplaces and feel their respective agencies are not responding adequately to this growing problem, according to a survey released today by the Safe Workplace Air Coalition (SWAC).

Nearly three-fourths of the 1000 government workers who responded to the survey reported that they believe poor indoor air quality is a serious problem in their workplace. Almost all (93.8%) of the respondents reported suffering from physical symptoms associated with poor indoor air quality.

The afflictions most frequently cited by respondents included drowsiness, sneezing, coughing and sinus congestion. Eighty-three percent of the respondents who suffer from these symptoms stated that they believe the poor air quality in their office building either causes or exacerbates their symptoms. Seventy percent of these respondents reported that their symptoms disappear when they leave work.

The survey results also showed that many federal and District employees are missing work because of the air quality problems in their office buildings. Of the government employees who responded to the survey, 47% reported that they have missed work because they were suffering from symptoms such as headaches, fatigue and nasal irritation that are associated with poor indoor air quality. Fifty-six percent reported that the poor air quality in their building had reduced their productivity.

"This survey dramatically demonstrates that federal and D.C. government employees are suffering from the serious and extremely hazardous effects of poor air quality in many government buildings," said SWAC Co-chair and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) National Vice President David Schlein.

Co-Chairs
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"Fifty-nine percent of the respondents feel that their agencies are not doing enough to provide clean air in the workplace. This is unacceptable," continued Schlein. "When the General Services Administration [GSA] imposed a virtual ban on smoking in federal buildings in 1986, they made a commitment to continue monitoring the indoor air and to provide a clean work environment for government employees. Yet the indoor air problems in many office buildings have only gotten worse. It is time for GSA to live up to their commitment."

The survey was delivered to a pool of 18,000 government workers in the Washington, D.C. area. The results released today are based on the first 1000 responses to the survey.

"These results, for the first time, provide us with accurate information about the growing problem of poor indoor air quality in federal and District buildings. And I think it's pretty clear that we are dealing with a very serious problem," Schlein stated.

Recently, numerous employees of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) have registered complaints about poor air quality in their buildings. Employees in both the USIA headquarters building and the EPA headquarters have complained of suffering from symptoms that may be related to poor air quality in their workplace. A few employees have been forced to move into offices outside of their building or take leaves of absence.

Experts maintain most indoor air quality complaints are related to inadequate or improper ventilation. According to Frank Powell, SWAC Co-chair and Director of Engineering for the National Energy Management Institute (NEMI), "An indoor environment that lacks proper ventilation and air filtration can allow for the growth and spread of germs and microbes that can infect building occupants. Dirt, dusts, fibers and potentially hazardous gases also may accumulate in the indoor atmosphere, to be distributed throughout the building by an improperly maintained ventilation or air handling system."

SWAC was formed by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) 14th District and the National Energy Management Institute (NEMI) to help protect workers from the hazards of poor air quality in the workplace.

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