

James (Jim) S. Frederick, Steelworkers' Mazzocchi Center

Jim Frederick's career is dedicated to helping workers protect themselves from hazards on the job. As a child growing up in Elkhart, Indiana, he witnessed first-hand why protecting workers from chemical and physical exposures is critically important. He vividly recalls sitting in his third-grade classroom and hearing the loud explosion of a nearby chemical processing facility blowing up. Many of the workers inside were badly injured or killed.

"Considering whose family member or relative might have been injured, or killed, was incredibly surreal," said Frederick. "I never forgot that experience - it really stuck with me."

Jim Frederick speaks on the challenges and successes in the occupational health and safety field. (Photo courtesy of United Steelworkers)

This childhood experience primed Frederick's commitment to the worker safety field. Today, Frederick is assistant director of the United Steelworkers' Health, Safety, and Environment department, where he is actively involved in a variety of initiatives aimed at protecting workers and the environments where they work and live. He is also principal investigator for the Steelworkers Charitable and Educational Organization's [Tony Mazzocchi Center](#) (TMC). TMC is an [awardee](#) of the NIEHS Worker Training Program (WTP).

The TMC provides workers and community residents with training to help prevent and prepare for toxic releases, fires, explosions, injuries, sickness, and death. It provides training to workers in a variety of industries, including chemical manufacturing, nuclear energy, pharmaceuticals, pulp and paper, automobile parts, appliance manufacturing, and cement. Partner organizations include Communications Workers of America, The Labor Institute, and two organizations representing immigrant workers, called Make the Road New York (MRNY) and National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON).

Driven to Protect Workers, Responders, and Communities

A key initiative of the TMC, which is funded by the [NIEHS WTP](#), provides improved training for disaster responders. Natural disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, expose communities and many workers to an array of public health hazards such as heat stress, toxic materials, fires, and mold exposure. Non-professional emergency responders, often called skilled support personnel, may lack essential training to prevent certain injuries and illnesses during rescue, recovery, and cleanup.



Workers attend a TMC disaster response training session.
(Photo courtesy of United Steelworkers)

To address this need, TMC is working with partners MRNY and NDLO to develop an expert cadre of Special Emergency Response Trainers (SERTs). These trainers will provide rapid-response health, safety, and environmental training for responders during and after disasters. The SERTs program develops Spanish-speaking trainers, who add an important skillset to the WTP’s national disaster training capacity. The SERTs program has already produced 39 qualified Spanish-speaking worker center trainers who conduct the entry-level 10-hour and advanced 30-hour courses of the Occupational Safety & Health Administration. Both MRNY and NDLO are among a growing number of worker centers across the U.S., which are community-based and community-led organizations that offer advocacy and organizing services to support low-wage workers.

Through SERTs, workers involved in Hurricane Sandy response were able to offer essential information to communities in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

“We got there before the response system was in place,” said Frederick. “So, we were at the front of the curve in terms of going into the communities, and seeing what we could do to help – while keeping cleanup workers safe.”

According to Frederick, many communities affected by Hurricane Sandy lacked basic knowledge about mold remediation—some residents even attempted to make respirators out of plastic food containers to protect themselves. SERTs-trained responders jumped in to provide essential information to the community on appropriate personal protective equipment and safe, effective mold remediation.

Noteworthy Gains to Protect Workers

Under Frederick’s leadership, the Steelworkers’ TMC is unique in that it provides training under all four of the WTP programs, and, as a result, has achieved many landmark successes, which include:

- Recruiting, training, and securing jobs for unemployed and underemployed workers in New York City who are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards.
- Training workers whose remediation and reclamation jobs at Department of Energy sites put them at risk of exposure to hazardous materials.
- Reaching 20,000 trainees per year.

“Our successes are really a result of many committed people coming together to make things happen,” said Frederick.

While citing these successes, Frederick pointed out other goals. Moving forward, he would like to see increased availability of multi-lingual trainers, improved access to training for unemployed and underemployed workers, and strengthened community education tools.

“Since the advent of the industrial revolution, there have been so many incredible gains to improve conditions for workers in this country,” said Frederick. “But on the flip side, we still have many immense challenges in the occupational health and safety field to protect workers from the chemical and physical exposures that make them sick.”