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Chip Mitchell (WBEZ), Jim Morris (Center for Public Integrity)

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A life-and-death wait for medical care raises questions
about U.S. safety protections for temp workers.
WBEZ91.5 **The Center for
Public Integrity**

was jointly reported by WBEZ's Chip Mitchell and the Center for Public Integrity's Jim Morris, story editing by WBEZ's Cate Cahan, photography by WBEZ's Logan Jaffe, data visualization by WBEZ's Elliott Ramos, multimedia editing by WBEZ's Tim Akimoff and executive editing by WBEZ's Sally Eisele and CPI's Ellen Weiss. Additional assistance by Anthony Martinez, Bryan Hayes and CPI's Chris Hamby.

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HOST: It sounds like a story you might hear out of Bangladesh or another far-away place. A factory worker suffers horrible burns on the job. His bosses refuse to call an ambulance as he screams in pain. Three weeks later, he dies. But this factory is right here in the Chicago area. The victim was part of a growing class of U.S. temporary workers. WBEZ's Chip Mitchell and Jim Morris of the Washington-based Center for Public Integrity investigated the death. They found that these temp workers face distinct hazards and that the government isn't keeping close track of their injuries. Chip begins our story.

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MITCHELL: It's November 17, 2011, about 1:30 in the afternoon.

SOUND: Woman's voice in Spanish.

MITCHELL: Velia Carbot — she lives with her family in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood — she gets a call from her husband. He's at work. His name's Carlos Centeno. He's 50. He's upset but won't say why. He's having a hard time getting any words out.

CARBOT: Le dije, "Pero que pasa?" Porque yo lo oía agitado y con dificultad para hablar. Y me dijo, "No, no pasa nada. Solamente dile que venga por mi al trabajo — que necesito que venga por mi."

MITCHELL: Carbot says her husband just wants their son to come pick him up. His name's Carlos Centeno Jr.

CENTENO JR: I was just coming back from the store. And I saw my mom coming out of the house. She said, "Your dad called you. He wants you to call him back. Something happened. He doesn't want to tell me."

MITCHELL: Centeno Jr. dials his father's number, but one of his coworkers answers.

CENTENO JR: He just says, "Your dad got burned at work. I'm taking him to the clinic."

MITCHELL: Now, before we go on, some background. This company — it's called Raani Corporation. It's in Bedford Park, near Midway Airport. It makes household and personal-care products, from shampoos to furniture polishes. About 150 people work there. More than a third of them are temporary workers, though some of these temps have been at Raani for years. What defines workers like these is that their employers are, technically, staffing companies. Centeno worked at Raani through a firm called Ron's Staffing Services. It's based in Northbrook, another suburb. He started in 2010 at minimum wage.

SOUND: Raani Corporation's compounding department.

MITCHELL: Raani had him clean 500-gallon tanks with chemicals and hot liquids. I asked Velia Carbot about her husband's protective gear.

CARBOT: No te dan algo para protegerte en la cara. . . .

MITCHELL: She says Raani didn't give her husband goggles or anything else to protect his face. OSHA — the Occupational Safety and Health Administration — OSHA records back that up. They say Raani employees handled corrosives and acids wearing just medical-grade latex gloves. So, on that November day, Centeno's cleaning one of the tanks. A mixture of nearly boiling water and citric acid erupts from a hatch. It burns most of his body. Raani officials discover the injury within minutes. They see pieces of skin peeling off him. He's screaming in pain. But supervisors don't have anyone rinse him off in a safety shower the company's installed. And they don't call for an ambulance.

NEWQUIST: That's something we figure everybody does — call right away for 911.

MITCHELL: John Newquist spent 30 years with OSHA. He helped lead a six-state region based in Chicago.

NEWQUIST: In thousands of inspections, I can't remember something like that happening before, especially with a burn case. I mean, that's not exactly a painless injury.

MITCHELL: Raani Corporation decides the place to go for an injury like Centeno's is a clinic. First, though, a company official fills out paperwork authorizing the treatment. And he reviews Centeno's driver's license. The company has another temp worker drive Centeno to the clinic.

MORRIS: Centeno's injury led to almost a half-million dollars in OSHA fines against Raani.

MITCHELL: Here's Jim Morris of the Washington-based Center for Public Integrity. He investigated Centeno's case with me.

MORRIS: Raani's contesting those fines. The company also faces a lawsuit from the man's family. The company's attorney told us there are "good and valid defenses" to what the family's alleging. But he wouldn't get specific or comment about the OSHA citations. An attorney for Ron's — that's the temp staffing service — he said the company had no comment at all.

MITCHELL: So here's Centeno, all burned. And, instead of an ambulance to a hospital, his coworker's taking him to an occupational health clinic. He's shivering and yelling, "Hurry!" It's a four-mile drive.

SOUND: Clinic staffer calling patients in waiting room.

MITCHELL (on site): Here inside the clinic, I see physical-therapy machines and some simple examining rooms. It's not set up for life-threatening burns. The clinic is part of a Nashville-based company called Vanguard Health Systems. A web page for the clinic describes its primary goal as improving the "productivity and profitability of your workforce."

MITCHELL: By the time Carlos Centeno reaches the clinic, it's around 2 p.m. OSHA records say it's at least 38 minutes since the tank erupted on him. A clinic physician observes burns covering more than 80 percent of Centeno's body.

CENTENO JR: I was angry and scared.

MITCHELL: Centeno Jr. and his mom are on their way. The son has the coworker on the phone — the guy who drove to the clinic.

CENTENO JR: I could hear people yelling in the back, "Why did you bring him here? This man has to be in the emergency room."

MITCHELL: The clinic staff rinses off the acid and calls 911.

SOUND: Chicago Fire Department ambulance leaves station and activates siren.

MITCHELL: A Chicago ambulance arrives at 2:26. It's now about an hour since the factory accident. The paramedics give Centeno oxygen but struggle to find an unburned part of his body for an IV. They see burns on his "head, face, neck, chest, back, buttocks, arms and legs." They get him started on morphine, but it helps only so much. They list his pain level at 10 on a 10-point scale. The paramedics help Centeno onto a stretcher and load him into the ambulance. They pull out of the clinic lot at 2:54. The ambulance bypasses some hospitals that don't have specialized burn units. It drives more than 9 miles to Loyola University Hospital in Maywood. Centeno winces and moans.

SOUND: Chicago Fire Department radio messages.

MITCHELL: Centeno's wife and son make it to the hospital before the ambulance.

CENTENO JR: They're like, "There's no patient with that name here."

MITCHELL: This was an hour and a half after the incident. He still hadn't arrived at the burn unit?

CENTENO JR: We were waiting in the parking lot. We saw a couple ambulances come in. I remember just walking up to all the ambulances [as they arrived] and it was someone else. It wasn't my dad.

MITCHELL: We need to step away from the story for just minute to hear something about the federal response to Centeno's injury. The way OSHA classified its inspection, it's not clear Centeno was a temporary worker.

MORRIS: And there's a related issue.

MITCHELL: Again, it's Jim Morris, my reporting partner.

MORRIS: For all but fatal injuries, the government doesn't usually distinguish between a worksite's temp workers and its regular employees. So the feds can't tell how many temps are getting injured.

MITCHELL: There is some scattered local research on that. And from that research, the injury numbers for temp workers don't look good. Linda Forst is a public health professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She studied 4,000 amputation injuries that took place in Illinois workplaces over eight years.

FORST: Of the 10 employers with the greatest number of amputation injuries, 5 of those were temp agencies. Not only that, those agencies tended to have worse amputations.

MITCHELL: Beyond, say, fingers.

FORST: One agency in particular had six workers that had amputations of either their arm or hand and two workers that had amputations of their legs.

MITCHELL: If temp workers are getting hurt more often than direct hires, there are reasons. There's confusion, for starters, about whether the staffing agency or the host company is responsible for safety training and equipment. Another thing: It's usually only the staffing agency that has to carry the worker's comp for the temps — the medical coverage for their injuries.

MORRIS: So, Chip, the companies that request the temp labor don't have to worry about injuries jacking up their premiums. There's less incentive to provide a safe workplace.

MITCHELL: There are people inside OSHA who think temp-worker safety deserves more of the agency's attention. People like John Newquist, that long-time OSHA official in Chicago. He retired this fall.

NEWQUIST: If you want to solve the problem, you just start saying, “OK, these are all the temp agencies in Illinois and we’re going to do 25 inspections.” Whatever random list you want to use, just go and say, “OK, we’re going to pick ABC Staffing. We want to see how good your workers are protected. We want to go to your places where you have the people temped out.”

MITCHELL: OSHA hadn’t inspected Raani Corporation for 18 years before Carlos Centeno suffered those burns. The agency told us it wouldn’t discuss the Centeno case while the company’s fighting the fines. And OSHA didn’t agree to an interview about temp-worker safety in general. So we caught up with a couple OSHA officials. They were addressing a conference in Maryland.

SOUND: Applause.

MITCHELL: I wanted to ask Mr. Fairfax a question . . .

MITCHELL: Richard Fairfax oversees OSHA’s 10 regional offices, among other things. He said temps — he called them contingent workers — he acknowledged they face particular safety risks.

MITCHELL (on site): What is OSHA doing about it?

FAIRFAX: We do inspections and we cover them and we cite the employers and we find the problems. We don’t separate out a contingent worker from a noncontingent worker. I mean, if we have a health-and-safety issue, if we have a complaint, and we do an inspection, we cover all workers there.

MITCHELL: How about, at least, keeping track of temp-worker injuries? We got to ask Jordan Barab that. He’s OSHA’s second-in-command.

BARAB: There are a number of things that we’re considering. I’m not really at liberty to talk about those now although it is something we’re discussing with other parts of the Department of Labor. Different reporting requirements are among the many things that are being considered there.

MITCHELL: Any OSHA efforts to target the staffing industry could meet resistance. Stephen Dwyer’s general counsel of the American Staffing Association, the industry’s main trade group.

DWYER: To the extent that efforts become heavy-handed, there can be a disincentive then to using temporary workers, which in turn will hurt temporary workers looking for work and for a bridge to permanent employment, as well as will hurt flexibility of clients to ramp up in connection with increased demand, and then hurt the overall economy.

MITCHELL: Carlos Centeno was looking for a bridge to permanent employment that day last year when the tank erupted and the hot acid engulfed him. It took at least 98 minutes for Centeno to reach a place that could treat his burns. The ambulance carrying him got to the hospital at 3:08 p.m. Centeno’s wife and son were there.

CENTENO JR: When they finally opened the doors and I saw it was him, and I could just see he was in pain. He was trying to hide it. He saw my mom and his eyes started to tear. He wanted to cry.

MITCHELL: The hospital staff rushed Carlos Centeno up to a burn unit. Three weeks later, on December 8, 2011, he died there. Reporting with the Center for Public Integrity's Jim Morris, I'm Chip Mitchell, WBEZ.

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