

Hundreds ask about radiation-related illnesses and long-ago jobs

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Several hundred people went to an Amherst hotel Thursday to get information about a new government program that is paying a lump-sum \$150,000 benefit to employees, or their survivors, who worked to develop atomic weapons and later suffered from radiation-related sicknesses.

That's on top of the estimated 500 people who came on the first two days of the outreach program, which continues today between 8 a.m. and noon in the Hampton Inn, 10 Flint Road.

The turnout in Buffalo surpassed the number of people who had turned up for similar sessions in California, Texas, Tennessee and New Mexico, according to Virginia Johnson of the Department of Energy's Office of Worker Advocacy.

"We brought more than 500 of the information packages, and by the middle of the first day, we had to go to Kinko's and have more copies made," she said.

The line of people wanting for more information, or help in filing their claims under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act, snaked through the hotel's lobby. And when the line shortened, new arrivals appeared as if on cue.

"They have been the best people and the most patient people we've seen," said Johnson, who said most of the people were coming from Bethlehem Steel, Hooker Chemical and Simonds Saw and Steel.

Some were disappointed. The program covers only those employees who worked at one of the 13 plants during a specific period of time. For instance, only those Bethlehem Steel workers who worked in Lackawanna from 1949 to 1951, when uranium was milled at the plant, and who had radiation-related cancer would be eligible.

"What people need to know is that this covers specific companies for a specific length of time," Johnson said. "It doesn't matter if you worked at Bethlehem Steel for 30 years" if it wasn't during the covered time period.

William Jaworski, 81, of West Seneca, came with his old buddy from Bethlehem Steel, 71-year-old Raymond Oberst of South Buffalo. They both worked at the steel plant during the time period, and both have health problems.

"I've got a very, very bad breathing problem," Oberst said. "And I'm starting to break out with moles on my body."

But Oberst said he's not sure whether his problems are due to radiation or asbestos, which he said he worked with while at the plant.

"We were working with that asbestos with no dust mask or gloves until 1975, when (the federal Occupational Safety and

Health Administration) came in," Oberst said. "Then they started issuing equipment, but we'd been breathing it for years. Now we're older, and this is the result."

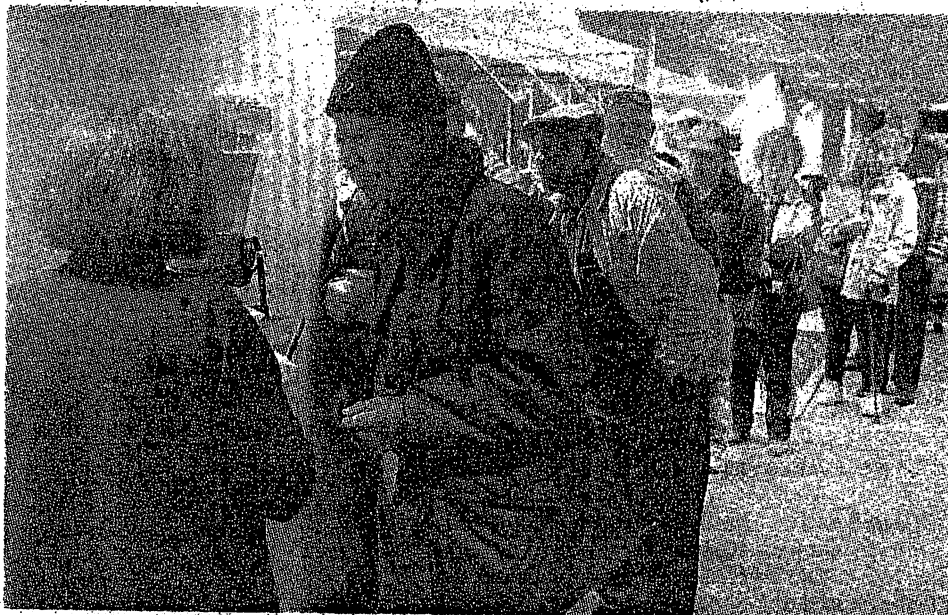
Jaworski said one of his brothers, who also worked at the plant, died of testicular cancer.

For many of the companies involved, the time period covered by the program is 50 to 60 years ago. Even those with the best of memories might have trouble recalling where they worked that long ago.

Some, such as Carol Monfort, had scheduled interviews in advance. Her husband, Charles, who worked for Linde Air from 1946 to 1953, was 52 when he died of cancer in 1980.

"We had just started going out together, so I don't even know if I remember what he did there," said the 68-year-old Cheektowaga woman, who spent 15 minutes with a claims specialist. "She sounded kind of optimistic. . . . When it's there, then I'll believe it."

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HARRY SCULL JR./Buffalo News
Virginia Johnson of the U.S. Department of Energy talks to people asking about compensation for ill effects linked to helping develop atomic weapons.