THE SAFE HOME PROJECT

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The Thai Health Promotion Foundation supported the Improvement of Quality of Life of Informal Workers project in Ban Luang District, Amphur Photaram, Ratchaburi Province. There were many informal workers in Ban Luang District. Sweet-crispy fish producers in Ban Luang were the largest group among the sweet-crispy fish producers in Thailand. This project was aimed at improving living and working conditions of informal workers, with a focus on the sweet-crispy fish group. Good practices of improved living and working conditions were used to help informal workers build safe, healthy and productive work environments. These informal workers often worked in substandard conditions and were exposed to various hazards in the working area. These hazards included risk of exposure to hot work environment, ergonomics-related injuries, chemical hazards, electrical hazards etc. Ergonomics problems were commonly in the sweet-crispy fish group. Unnatural postures such as prolonged sitting were performed dominantly. One hundred and fifty informal workers participated in this project. Occupational health volunteers were selected to encourage occupational health and safety in four groups of informal workers in 2009. The occupational health volunteers trained in 2008 were farmers, beauty salon workers and doll makers. The occupational health and safety knowledge is extended to a new informal worker group: sweet-crispy fish producer, in 2009. The occupational health and safety training for sweet-crispy fish group is conducted by occupational health volunteers. The occupational health volunteers increased their skills and knowledge assist in to make safe home and safe community through participatory oriented training. The improvement of living and working condition is conducted by using a modified WISH, Work Improvement for Safe Home, checklist. The plans of improvement were recorded. The informal workers showed improvement mostly on material handling and storage. The safe uses and safe storage of chemicals were introduced among farmers. The awareness of healthcare using personal protective equipments is increased in all groups especially in farmers. Safe home by local occupational health volunteer is proposed to be one effective measure for improvement of quality of life.

Key words: occupational health volunteer; safe home; WISH

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-four million workers in Thailand are classified as the informal sector workers, while there are 14 million formal workers. A prominent great difference between the two groups is that the promotion of occupational health and safety (OHS) by Thai laws and Thai regulation are dramatically cover only in the formal workers. Informal workers are not protected by occupational health and safety laws and regulations. In general, these workers have no permanent employment. They are not covered by the government’s legal and welfare systems. (International Labour Office, 2005; Phoon,
2001). The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the informal sector as very small-scale units producing and distributing goods and services, which are composed of independent self-employed producers in urban and rural areas of developing countries. The units practically operate at a low level of productivity with little capital and skills. They gain low and irregular income, while informal-sector workers make a significant contribution to economic activities, accounting for an estimated rate of 30% to 60% of the gross national product (GNP) in several developing countries (Phoon, 2001). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated 60 to 80% of the total workforce in developing countries is in the informal sector. A survey carried out by the National Statistics Office (NSO) revealed that, in Thailand there were approximately 50 million people of age between 15 to 60% in the workforce out of the total population of 65.68 million or 76.1% of the population. Among the 50 million people of working age, 37.8 million people (75.6%) are employed, including 13.7 million (36.3%) in the formal sector and 24.1 million (63.7%) in the informal sector. The greatest number of informal sector workers was 10.1 million (41.9%) in the Northeast, followed by 5.2 million (21.5%) in the North. The smallest number of informal-sector workers was 3.1 million (12.8%) in the South (National Statistics Office, 2009). Since 2007, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation supported the Improvement of Quality of Life of Informal Workers project in Thailand. Ban Luang District, Amphur Photaram, Ratchaburi Province was selected to be the studied area for the informal workers in the central part of Thailand. There were many informal workers in Ban Luang District. Sweet-crispy fish producers in Ban Luang were the biggest group of the sweet-crispy fish producers in Thailand. As mentioned above, there is no system to protect these workers and to prevent the occupational hazards in the informal workers. This paper proposed the OHS volunteer system to improve the living and working conditions of informal workers based on the participatory approach. Kogi (2006), Krungkaiwong et al. (2006) and Arphorn et al. (2006) confirmed that participatory approach helped motivate workers to participate in the problem solving process especially in dealing with occupational health and safety concerns.

METHODS

The duration of this study was two years, from 2008 to 2009. The subjects were from three groups of informal workers: farmers, beauty salon workers and doll makers in 2008. Then, they became the occupational health volunteers in 2009. The sweet-crispy fish producers participated in 2009 as trainees. The main curriculum for occupational health volunteers was the program of the Work Improvement for Safe Home (WISH) from ILO, developed by Kawakami (2006) and Arphorn (2003). WISH was modified from the two-day consecutively training activity to be the two-day activity but it was not performed in the consecutive mode. The content of the training package covered materials handling, work-station improvement, machine safety, physical hazards and welfare facilities. The duration of the training practically took 2 hours for a topic. It included group discussion and presentation after a 45-min technical session. The local good examples were demonstrated in each technical session. Applying the same concept of WISH, the modified WISH program provided participatory and action oriented training and led to rapid and sustainable improvements. It was implemented among three groups of informal workers: farmers, beauty salon workers and doll makers in 2008 in Ban Luang District. The contents for the training course contained an extra compared with part from the original WISH program such as chemical safety, basic toxicology and basic ergonomics. Common chemicals used in the household such as the detergents were selected as the training media. The samples of modified safety data sheets were explained. The signs for hazard communication of chemicals were introduced. A session concerning “how to use personnel protective equipments” for 1 hour was conducted for all of the workers groups. The training on muscular pains especially low-back pain, was implemented. The contents for hazard identification for each working process for each group were determined by the workers. The modified checklist of WISH was always useful for reminding to the group of the plan of work improvement. The home visits for follow-up activities were conducted.
The workers learned together about safe homes. The discussion on the improvement was usually very active. The trained workers were named as occupational health volunteers. They were accepted and promoted by the local government. The occupational health volunteers increased their OHS knowledge through the determination and evaluation of the working process of sweet-crispy fish producers. They planned and proposed the project on OHS improvement among sweet-crispy fish producers to the Thai Health Promotion Foundation. Then, they got financial support from this foundation to conduct half-day OHS training in sweet-crispy fish producers and following activities. The local government facilitated the organization of this project. The volunteers mainly used local good examples to promote OHS among sweet-crispy fish producers. The group discussion and presentation were conducted to find out the practical action plans. The follow-up activity was conducted afterward. The modified WISH checklist was the tool for evaluating the conditions as safe homes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The modified WISH was appropriate to the informal workers groups because the members of the groups could not attend the training activities for two consecutively days. The design of the course had to consider the practical schedule in term of the period and the duration of the training activities because the characteristics of their employment were normally irregular. The learning of good practices could help the workers initiate low-cost improvement and could be easily extended to the neighbors as shown in the training for sweet-crispy fish producers. Three groups of informal workers: farmers, beauty salon workers and doll makers implemented improvements mostly about materials handling and storage. It was revealed that they could gain some knowledge from this curriculum and this gained knowledge could be applied to fulfill the improvement. The safe use and the storage of chemicals were widely conducted among farmers. The chemical warning sign 6 in the local language were introduced in the chemicals storage areas of farmers’ homes. It was confirmed with the study of Kogi (2006), Krungkaiwong et al. (2006) and Arphorn et al. (2006) that the participatory approach helped motivate workers to participate in the problem solving process applying low-cost solutions. This good practice for conducting low-cost improvements was demonstrated among the sweet-crispy fish producers, and then similar improvements in materials storage were performed. The awareness of healthcare using personal protective equipments increased in all the groups, especially in farmers. The participatory approach helped not only motivate workers but also link the network of the local government with the consideration of to consider the community problems. The results of this study agreed with those of Manothum et al. (2009), that indicated that the participatory approach encouraged the use of local networks leading to cooperation within the group to create appropriate technologies to solve their problems in working conditions. The impact from this study was noted in subsequent planning of waste water treatment among sweet-crispy fish producers. The local government started the project of physical health examinations among some farmers, beauty salon workers and doll makers. This activity was based on the cooperation between the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Interior at the local level. This plan would be extended to the sweet-crispy fish producers group soon. The success of training activity by occupational health volunteers motivated the local government to realize the volunteers’ capabilities and responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The safe home project involving local occupational health volunteers is proposed to be an effective measure for the improvement of quality of life. Local networks play an important role in providing both technical and financial support for improving home safety through occupational health volunteers.
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REFERENCES


