Ex-Fernald workers can get free tests

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CROSBY TWP. - Ray Beatty is looking for former Fernald workers.

Beatty, coordinator of a program that offers free health exams for men and women who used to work at the old uranium foundry here, is trying to get the word out about an early lung cancer detection program available to them.

Through the Worker Health Protection Program, former Fernald workers can get free low-dose CT scans.

The foundry, which operated from 1951 to 1989, refined raw uranium ore for use in nuclear weapons and atomic power plants. Over the years, workers were exposed to many toxins, including the uranium itself and its byproduct, radon. Radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S.

From October 2009 through July, 247 former Fernald workers got the scans, but many more are eligible, he said.

"Our biggest dilemma has been trying to find folks," he said.

Nationally, Beatty said Wednesday night, the program has found 62 lung cancer cases among some 10,000 former workers at seven nuclear sites around the U.S.

Most of those were early-stage cancers, he said.

Former Fernald workers and residents who live around the site, now a federal nature preserve, got updates on ongoing programs monitoring workers and residents for health problems related to contamination from the site.

The site opened in 1951, and work there was shrouded in secrecy. Many people in the surrounding communities had no idea what kind of work went on at the site.

In 1984, residents were outraged to learn that three residential wells had been contaminated by uranium runoff from the foundry. Those families sued, and the litigation resulted in a 10-year, $4.4 billion cleanup of the site.

It's been turned into a nature preserve; these days, the only real clue to the site's former role is in the visitor center display explaining its history.

But workers and residents who lived around the site have suffered a variety of health problems, including cancers, because of contamination from the site.

Two medical monitoring programs - one for residents, one for workers - were set up.

The program for residents, which offered a variety of health screenings, ended in 2008.

More than 9,700 men, women and children enrolled in the program, said Robert Wones, an internal medicine specialist at the University of Cincinnati and medical director for both monitoring programs.

Exposure to the radioactive uranium dust emitted from the plant increased residents' risk of cancers, and the people in the program do have higher rates of several cancers, including lung, breast, kidney and prostate cancers, than the general population, Wones said.
Among female residents around the site, the risk of developing breast cancer was about 85 percent higher among those who lived closest to the site and were there during the 1950s and 1960s, and those who were exposed to radiation by or before age 15.

But because of the medical services provided, survival rates are higher, and life spans are longer.

"There's about 242 people alive today that would not otherwise be alive," he said.

More than 2,600 former workers are enrolled in a separate, ongoing medical monitoring program, he said. Almost 700 of the former workers have died since the program was established in 1995, but of the survivors, more than half continue to come in for exams.

The programs offered screenings for all kinds of health problems, not just those known to be linked to radiation exposure, Wones said, with the goal of improving participants' overall health.

One example was cholesterol testing. Cholesterol levels aren't known to be linked to radiation exposure, he said, "but keeping them down is one of the best ways to help people live longer," he said.

The programs are providing a gold mine of information on radiation exposure for ongoing research, said Susan Pinney, an epidemiologist at UC who's conducted several studies on the Fernald workers and residents.

Information from the residents alone has created a vast database and a collection of more than 150,000 biological specimens available for use by researchers all around the country.

The information has been used in more than 50 studies, Pinney said.

Data collected through the programs have also been "extremely helpful" to workers filing for compensation for illnesses related to their jobs at the old foundry, Beatty said.

More work remains to be done, Pinney said. Workers can still get health checks through the medical monitoring program, but Pinney and her colleagues need to follow up on residents. Their monitoring program ended in 2008. Women who participated in the program got reminder letters about their increased risk of breast cancer earlier this year, she said, and those letters resulted in some recipients getting mammograms.

Beatty's program serves workers who were at the plant from 1986 until the cleanup ended in 2006. One interesting finding is that more than half of the men and women screened show signs of hearing loss - a problem linked to radiation exposure.

Former workers interested in the early lung cancer screening can call 888-241-1199. For information on other health services for former Fernald workers, visit www.worker-health.org.