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Harkin speaks to former IAAP workers

Retiring U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin helped secure federal money for sick ammunition plant workers.

By WILLIAM SMITH
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U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin spoke to a packed room at Memorial Auditorium Thursday afternoon, addressing former Iowa Army Ammunition Plant workers and their families during their annual luncheon.

Photo



Harkin is not seeking re-election, and his "legacy" tour started in May, with stops at sites related to work he's done in Congress. Harkin co-sponsored legislation providing compensation for workers at the IAAP who were exposed to radiation and later were diagnosed with cancer.

"If there's a bright spot amidst this long and difficult journey, it's that so many people here have forged deep friendships and a sense of family and community," Harkin said. "I know that it's easy to find

fault with bureaucracy. Sometimes the wheels of justice just grind slowly. But our government, your government, was willing to listen, adjust its position and do the right thing."

Since about 1949, when the workers first started their endeavors at the Iowa Ordnance Plant, until little more than a decade ago, they remained mum on the issue of their work assignments, even to close family members. Signs like "Tittle tattle lost the battle" decorated their workspace.

Then, during President George H.W. Bush's tenure, he opened the door by starting an investigation into the health conditions of former workers.

A few years later, in 1997, Harkin got a letter from a constituent named Bob Anderson - a shift lieutenant on Line 1 at the IOP - who wrote about how he and many of his former co-workers had become ill with various types of cancer after working at the plant. Although the U.S. Army initially denied these accusations, Harkin continued to investigate the situation and discovered Department of Energy workers were, in fact, exposed to massive doses of radiation from 1948 to 1974.

The primitive safety measures in place at the time meant these workers were exposed to unmonitored and excessive levels of radiation and other chemicals that led many to develop various types of cancer and other illnesses. Harkin has continued to work to get compensation to Anderson and thousands of other sick workers across the United States, including the passage of the bipartisan Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Plan Act of 2000.

To date, the U.S. Department of Labor has paid out almost \$300 million in compensation to workers and survivors in Iowa, including both the Burlington workers and former workers at the Ames Laboratory.

"Thanks to Sen. Harkin and his great staff, we won our cause, which resulted in help and aid to date

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for 1,997 out of an estimated 4,000 workers at the plant who were made ill by their work in defense of our country," Anderson said. "That cost amounted to \$241 million, and that's in addition to the cost of building the weapons and paying their employees their salaries to begin with. That's a terrible expense to have to pay for something that should have been done right from the beginning."

About half of the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant's retired employees who have gotten involved with the Burlington Atomic Energy Commission Plant Former Worker Program have passed away during the past 10 years. Vaughn Moore, a former guard with the IAAP and current member the Restoration Advisory Board, provided a list of all the guards at the plant (not counting lieutenants) from 1973. Most of those names were crossed off.

"You know, there's only 70 of us alive. There were 207," he said.

Dennis Schnedler of Burlington worked as a guard at IAAP for two years, and now he lives life with an oxygen tank. He has been receiving compensation from the Former Worker Program for the past two years.

"I was in all the wrong areas. That includes Line 1," he said. "When I left the plant, I felt fine. Then it, the bronchitis or whatever, kept getting worse."

Laurence Fuortes, project director for the Former Worker Program at the University of Iowa College of Public Health, has become a familiar face at the annual gatherings, and he encouraged everyone who hasn't signed up for the program to do so.

"The program isn't a whole lot of cash in hands to the workers, but the tremendous benefit has been the coordination of care, which is covered fully under this Department of Labor program," he said.

Harkin summed up the plight of the former IAAP workers in a few sentences.

"Workers at IAAP did their work at great personal peril. You folks truly were on the front lines of the Cold War. You received no medals, no thank-yous, no special hardship pay. Instead, many paid a terrible price," Harkin said.



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John Lovretta/The Hawk Eye
Sen. Tom Harkin, greets Bob Anderson, a former shift lieutenant on Line 1 at the low a Ordnance Plant who wrote Harkin in 1997 about the large number former co-workers at the plant who had become ill with various types of cancer. The two were re-acquainted Thursday during the annual picnic for former workers of the low a Army Ammunition plant at Memorial Auditorium. Watching the pair is Laurence Fuortes, right, the head of low a's Former Worker Medical Screening Program. Harkin, who is not seeking re-election, is on a "legacy" tour, stopping at sites in low a related to work he's done in Congress. Harkin co-sponsored legislation providing compensation for workers at the IAAP who were exposed to radiation and later were diagnosed with cancer.

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