SHARP
Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention

WERC
Work Equity Research Center

# Improving Health for Workers with Overlapping Vulnerabilities: Cleaners in Washington State


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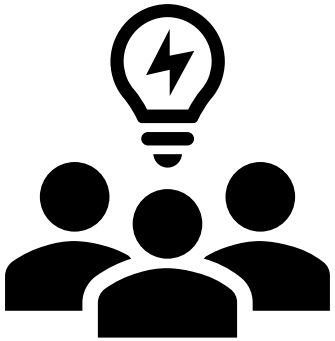

# Objectives

1. Describe the intersection of political, economic, and psychosocial factors impacting worker health.
2. Report demographics of cleaners
3. Explain CORE project, findings, & deliverables.
4. Share resources/policy updates





# What comes to mind when you think of occupational safety and health?



# About SHARP & WERC

## Safety & Health Assessment & Research for Prevention

- Research team that focuses on workplace safety and health research.
- Use research to prevent workplace injuries and illnesses by developing solutions that support workers and employers.

## Work Equity Research Center

- The purpose of WERC is to co-create research and solutions with communities to improve work-related outcomes for historically and currently underserved workers.

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# Workplace safety & health are critical social determinants of health



The average person spends a significant amount of their life at work.



Can impact health in many ways:

Physical
Mental
Social
Economic

# Work equity is critical to ensure population health

**Work Equity Research Center (WERC)**

The purpose of WERC is to co-create research and solutions with communities to improve work-related outcomes for historically and currently underserved workers.

WERC
Work Equity Research Center

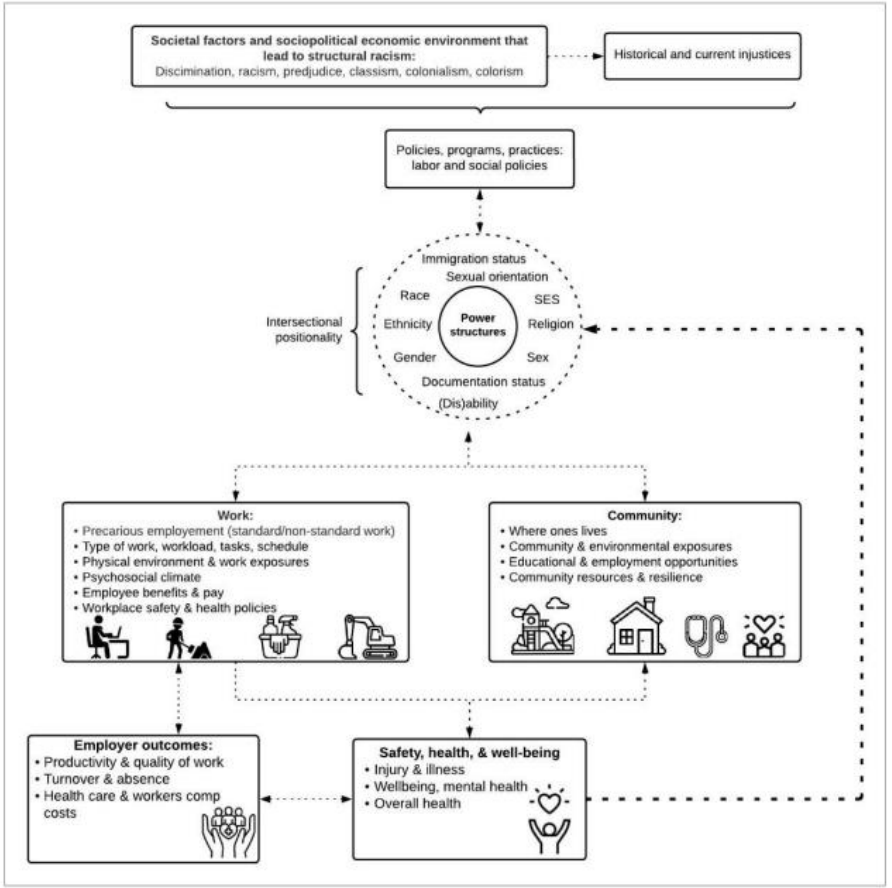



*Figure 1. WERC Conceptual Framework*

# Work inequity at different levels

| | |
|---|---|
| Policy | • Economic policies (e.g., minimum wage, sick leave)<br>• Anti-discrimination policies (e.g., hiring practices, mistreatment, sexual harassment) |
| Community/ interpersonal | • Built environment (e.g., public transportation, public spaces)<br>• Jobs & opportunities in the neighborhood you live in<br>• Network |
| Individual | • High hazard jobs<br>• Low wages<br>• Unstable schedules/hours |

# Equity Matters – job quality varies

- Precarious employment (PE)
  - "Uncertain, Unstable, Insecure…" (Bhattacharya & Ray, 2023)
  - PE is hypothesized to impact health and well being through (Hajat et al, 2024):
    - Material deprivation
    - Psychosocial stress
    - Exposure to workplace hazards
  - Non-standard work arrangements, temporary employment, scheduling insecurity, low-wage work, non-union jobs
- Overlapping vulnerabilities (NIOSH/ASSE, 2015)

- Women
- Younger/older workers
- Minoritized individuals
- Immigrants
- Individuals with low SES
- Employed in smaller businesses

# Janitors & cleaners are important

- Critical to public health
- Disproportionate share of risk factors that create high-hazards jobs
- Social & economic inequities

Compared with other occupations, janitors & cleaners have elevated rates of work-related injuries & illnesses (WRII)



# Commercial cleaning – the janitorial services industry



In 2023, the janitorial services industry had an annual payroll in Washington State of over $680 million (County Business Patterns)



Almost 64% of janitorial services industry workers were employed in the King-Snohomish-Pierce county region.



Over 18,000 individuals worked within this industry in 2025 (Washington State Employment Security Department).

| | Share of Employment (%) | |
|---|---|---|
| | Washington State | |
| | Janitors | All Occupations |
| **Female** | 34.9 | 45.9 |
| **White, non-Hispanic/Latine** | 68.5 | 73.3 |
| **Hispanic/Latine (any race)** | 24.6 | 13.5 |
| **Asian/Pacific Islander** | 12.8 | 13.8 |
| **Black/African-American, non-Hispanic/Latine** | 9.0 | 4.5 |
| **Other** | 9.1 | 7.7 |
| **Education** | | |
| **Less than high school** | 16.8 | 26.2 |
| **High school** | 54.8 | 25.7 |
| **Some college/associate** | 20.7 | 19.0 |
| **Bachelor's degree** | 6.3 | 17.9 |
| **Graduate/Professional** | 1.4 | 11.1 |

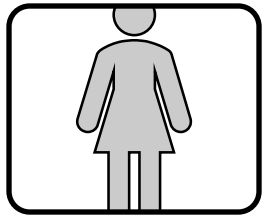
Janitorial Services Industry demographics - **American Community Survey, Five-Year Tabulation, 2020-2024.** Census Occupation 4220. Employed population. "Other" includes other race, American Indian/Native Alaskan, and individuals of two or more races/ethnicities.

# Cleaners' Occupational Injury Reduction Emphasis (CORE)

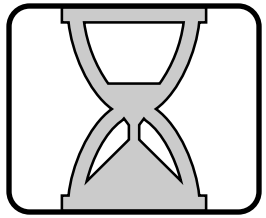


- Tasked by the Washington State legislature to identify workload issues and risk factors contributing to high rates of work-related injuries and illnesses.
- Goal → find root causes of common injuries and illnesses and create prevention and intervention tools.

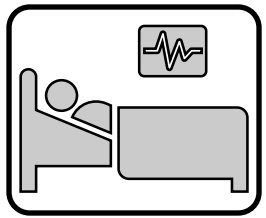
# Workers' compensation claims



Janitors who filed claims were mostly women (58%)



Between 25-44 years old (44%) when they filed



About 30% of claims progress to wage replacement or disability

# Most common (serious) injuries:



## ~30% Work-related Musculoskeletal Disorders (WMSDs):

- Conditions that disturb or disrupt the functions of the musculoskeletal system and are caused or exacerbated by work.
- WMSDs can be painful and debilitating.



## ~25% Falls:

- More commonly on same level than from elevation
- Janitors encounter many slip, trip, & fall hazards – such as crowded floorplans, wet/dirty surfaces, stairs, and electrical cords

# Disparities in janitors' work-related injury & illness

## Smith & Anderson

- Women were estimated to account for 35% of janitorial service workers but made up 55% of serious claims.
- Preferring Spanish language communication was associated with higher median medical costs.
- Non-English language communication was associated with higher time loss days for women.

2017

## Anderson, Smith, & Foley

- Women, and janitors who were Latine had significantly higher relative risk of WRII.
- Increased risk was also associated with several work organization factors.
- Half of injured janitors did not file workers' compensation (WC) claims.

2021

# Economic background

- **Commercial janitors often work for a company that is different than the company where they clean.**
- **Increased workloads for janitors have been reported as an issue since the early 2010s (Seixas et al, 2013; Teran & Gonzalez, 2016)**
  - Budget cuts -> fewer workers -> increased workload for remaining workers
- **SEIU-6 Seattle - represents janitors and other property services workers, advocated for WA legislation around workload**

# Annual Self-Sufficiency Wage Needed in Select WA Counties, 2024 estimates.

Scan to use the UW Self-Sufficiency Calculator →

| Area | Annual Self-Sufficiency Wage Needed (1 Adult) | Median annual wage: All occupations | Median annual wage: janitors |
|---|---|---|---|
| King County | $45,800 - $58,400 | $72,600 | $46,500 |
| Spokane County | $32,700 | $54,700 | $40,000 |
| Yakima County | $32,000 | $53,500 | $42,300 |

# Active study components

- Isolated workers
- Workload assessment
- WC data analysis & injured worker interviews

# Isolated worker interviews and focus groups

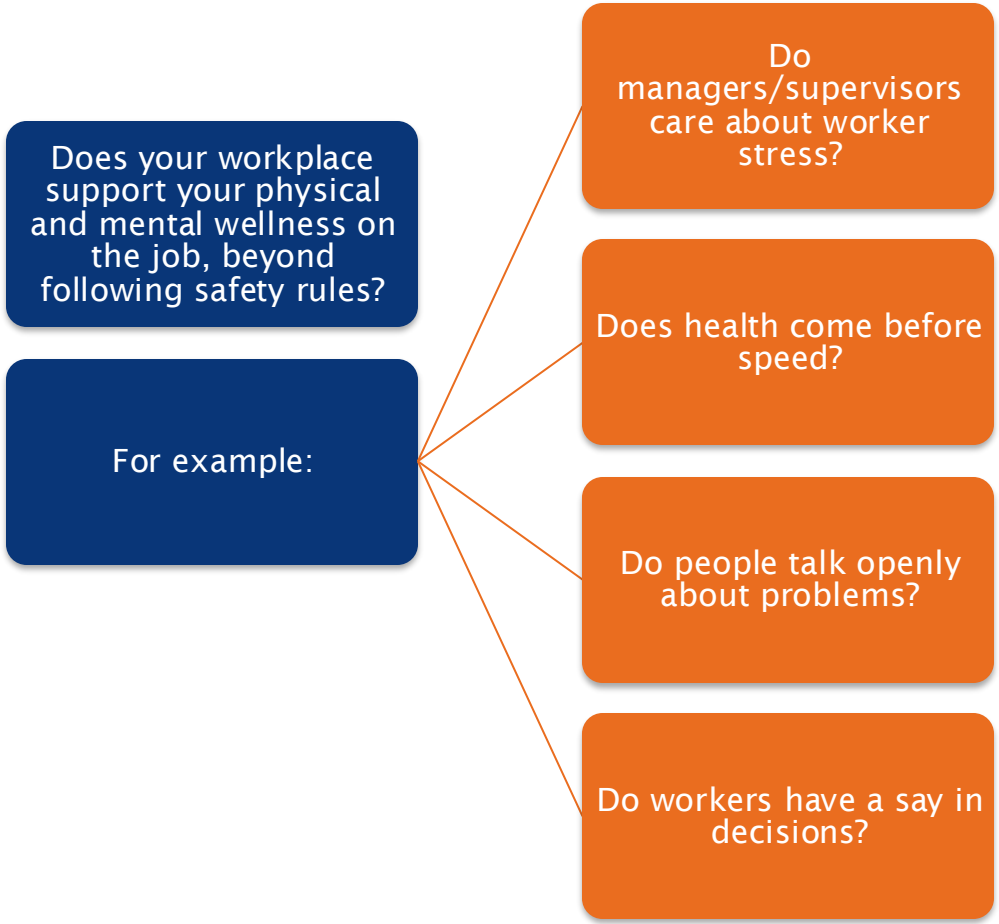


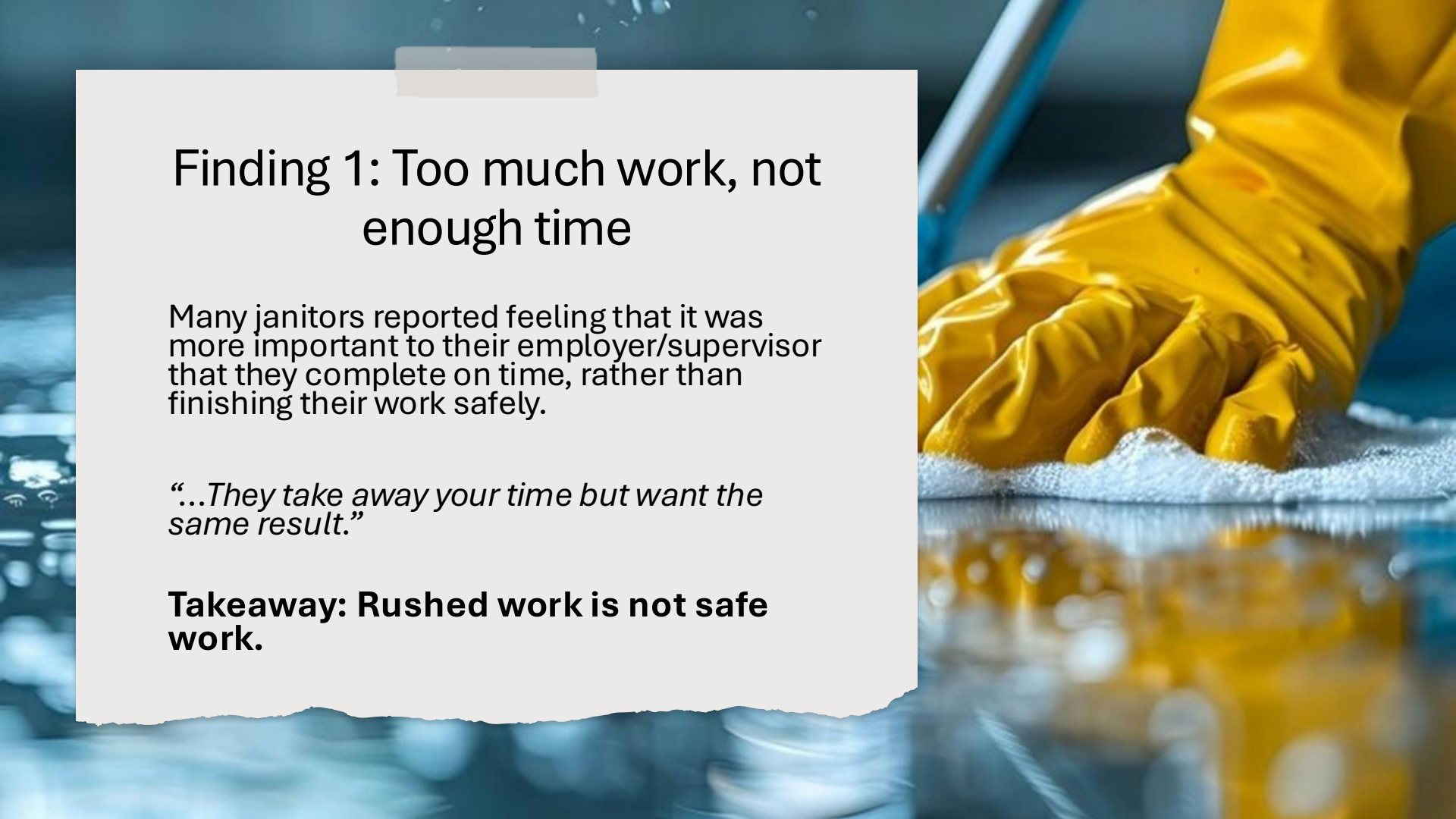
Conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups with lone janitorial workers from September 2025 to April 2026.



Focused on understanding psychosocial safety climate

# What is psychosocial safety climate (PSC)?



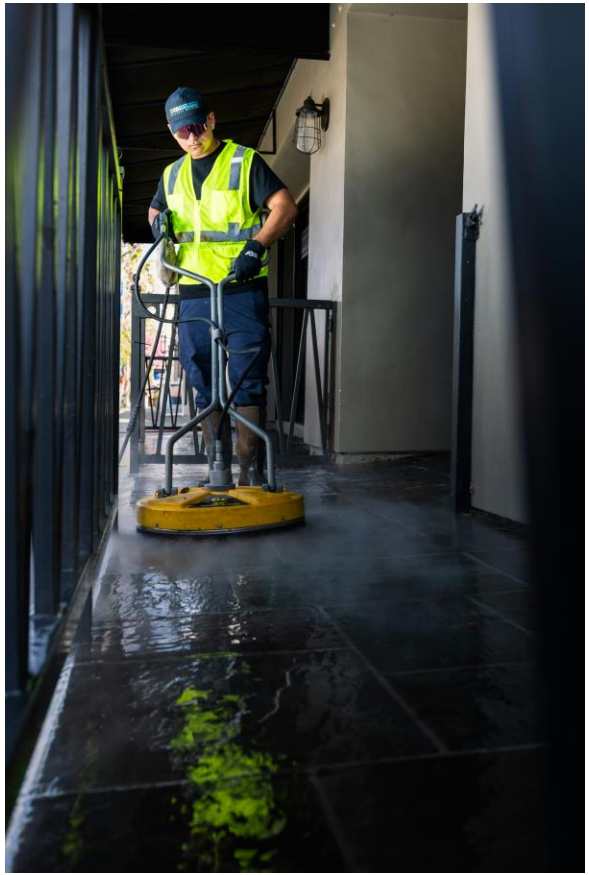


# Finding 1: Too much work, not enough time

Many janitors reported feeling that it was more important to their employer/supervisor that they complete on time, rather than finishing their work safely.

*“…They take away your time but want the same result.”*

**Takeaway: Rushed work is not safe work.**

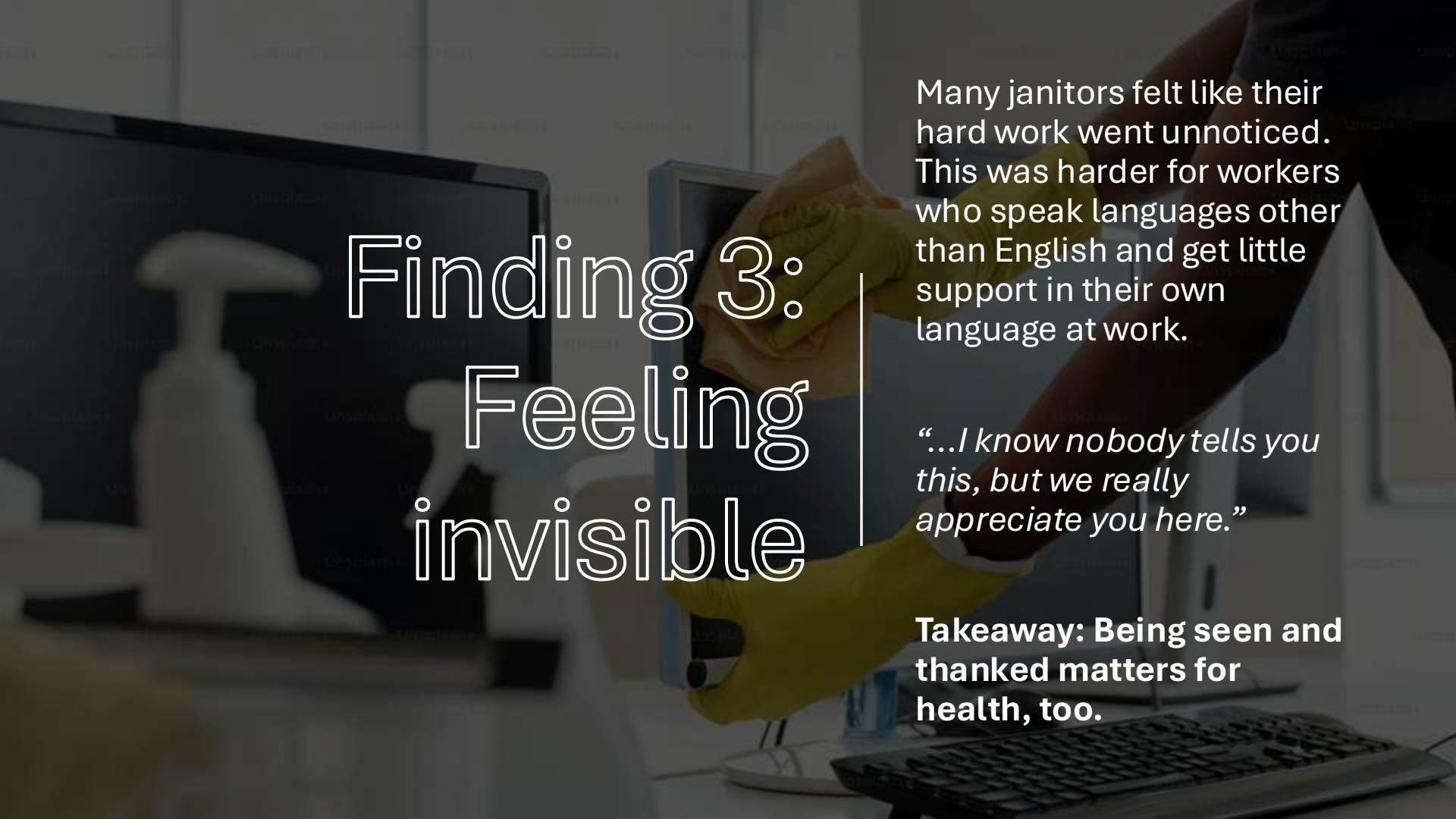


# Finding 2: Alone and afraid to speak up

Many janitors shared that speaking up about a problem did not help. Sometimes it led to fewer hours or more work, instead of support.

*"…It's like they put a piece of tape over your mouth so you keep doing your job."*

**Takeaway: Staying silent should not be the only safe choice.**



# Finding 3: Feeling invisible

Many janitors felt like their hard work went unnoticed. This was harder for workers who speak languages other than English and get little support in their own language at work.

*"...I know nobody tells you this, but we really appreciate you here."*

**Takeaway: Being seen and thanked matters for health, too.**

# Policy awareness

RCW 49.60.515 was passed in 2025.

Mandates employers to provide panic buttons and sexual harassment prevention training

Most participants were unaware of this state law.

Learn more about the policy by scanning the QR code:



# Ergonomic Assessments - Mop study

Mop study featured on King5 Seattle



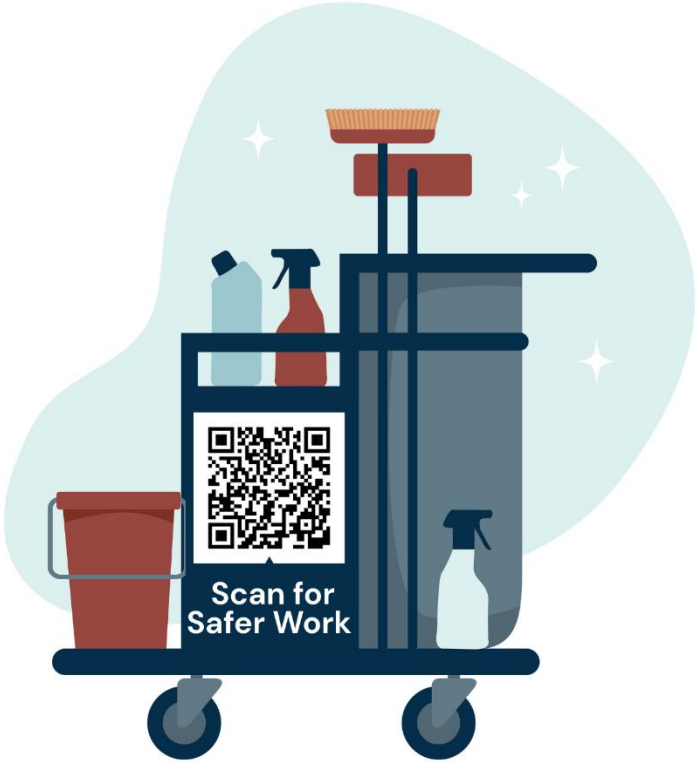
Scan the QR code to watch the 2-minute video!

# Janitors' Workload Calculator

- Team of ergonomists designed the calculator to provide a method to address high workloads that can lead to increased injuries
- The calculator is designed to work for various professionals including:
  - Managers & supervisors
  - Environmental, Health, & Safety (EHS) professionals
  - Cleaners
  - Union representatives & other community/research partners

# Janitors' Workload Calculator

- The calculator measures workload based on the strain that cleaning work puts on workers' bodies – it looks at risks to the back, shoulder, and hand/wrist.
- Scan the QR code with your phone camera to go to the calculator!



# Injured Worker Interviews

- Review WC claims for janitors monthly; select a few each month to call

Limited by –

- Availability / night shift work
- Length
- Reluctance to engage with government in general
- Fear of retaliation, losing job, risking WC benefits
- Language



*No data on injured workers who do not file claims*

# Sharing & Collaboration



Quarterly Newsletter & Tip Sheet – 8 languages



SEIU-6 meetings



Outreach – Community, Employers & Industry



Conferences / professional associations



Collaboration – CA, NIOSH

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# Hoja de consejos de seguridad para empleados de limpieza:

consejos sobre salud y seguridad para prevenir lesiones relacionadas con el trabajo de limpieza

**¡Los productos químicos sin etiqueta pueden ser peligrosos!** Primavera de 2024



**Nunca ponga productos químicos en botellas de agua, vasos u otros recipientes para bebidas**




**Siempre ponga los productos químicos en recipientes claramente rotulados**

## Hãy Đề Phòng Những Mối Nguy Hiểm Tiềm Ẩn!



**Quý vị có thể chỉ ra nơi kim tiêm thường được giấu không?**



**骷髅头和交叉骨形**

该图表示这种化学物质具有急性毒性，可在短时间内造成严重危害，甚至导致死亡。



**人体健康危害-**

该图表示这种化学物质可能会立即或在一段时间内对人体健康造成危害。这意味着它可能会致癌、损害生育能力或引起其他毒性反应。

## Tips for Safer Mopping

### Safer

- Good handle length
- Upright body posture



### Not as safe

- Handle too short
- Awkward back posture



# Janitors' recommendations for safer workplaces

- Time, tools, training - ***"We need training. It's the best way to understand safety and stay ready for new problems."***
- Getting help fast for safety - ***"When you have nothing [referring to a safety system], you are paralyzed. But when the option exists, it can even save a life."***
- Know your rights - ***"When you start a new job, always take a photo of the worker's rights. You should always be aware of them."***



# Main takeaways



These issues are likely impacting workers beyond janitors.



Safer workplaces benefit everyone.



Systemic racism and inequitable policies perpetuate the marginalization of workers.

# Un agradecimiento especial | Special thanks to:

All the workers, employers, and community partners who participated in this research, including Service Employee International Union Local Chapter 6 (SEIU6), Service Employee International Union Healthcare 1199NW (SEIU 1199NW), Spokane Alliance, Entre Hermanos, El Centro de la Raza, the University of Washington & the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies, Geoff Lawson (South Whidbey School District), and janitors & custodians across Washington state.

- *CORE team – Naomi Anderson, Erica Chavez Santos, Stefani Florez-Acevedo, Stephen Bao, Jia-Hua Lin, Niki Howard, Kristina Garbuz, Mike Foley, Dave Bonauto*
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# Questions? Comments? Suggestions?

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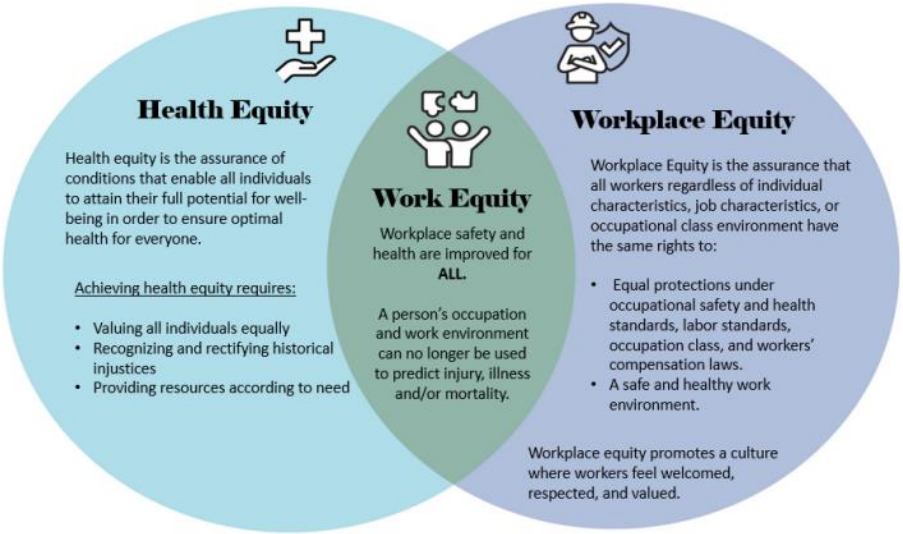
Scan the QR for the CORE study newsletter and publications:

**For more information:**

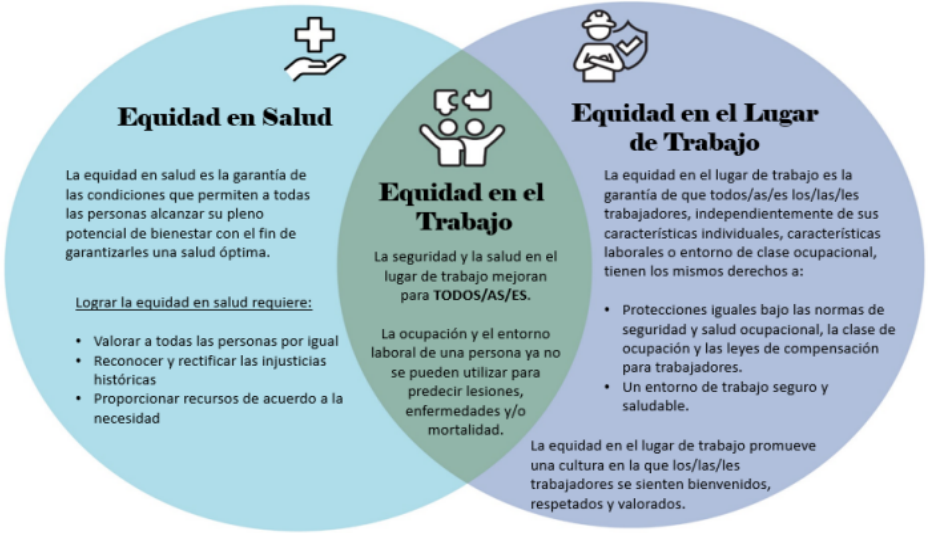
- Email CleanerStudy@Lni.wa.gov
- Call 1-888-667-4277, press 2 for CORE
- Sign up for our quarterly newsletter about the study

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Graphic that describes the Work Equity Research Center's (WERC) definition of work equity.




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Gráfico que representa la definición de equidad laboral del Centro de Investigación en Equidad Laboral (WERC)