Worker Helpline
Successfully Addressing Factory Workers Concerns
Ethical Toy Program Worker Helpline - Successfully Addressing Factory Workers Concerns

Key Helpline figures: (2010-2018)

- 15,622 Total number of workers calling helpline
- 713,718 Number of workers covered
- 1,582,000 Number of Helpline Cards distributed
- 9 years Length of operation
- 1,777 Number of factories covered
- 1,003 Number of escalated cases investigated by IETP staff

Issues facing workers in China

As China developed into an industrial powerhouse, many young adults moved from rural areas to urban centers to work in factories creating a new generation of domestic migrant workers in China’s labor market. China’s household registration system, the hukou, which is gradually being reformed, has historically tied many social services to the location where you are from which means migrant workers in larger cities can be challenged to access proper healthcare, housing or education.

Migrant workers face other challenges as well. For example:

- They are not well informed about basic health, safety and labor standards which subject them to higher risks and human rights violations in the workplace.
- Many do not have the time, knowledge or adequate resources to resolve labor disputes or pursue their labor rights through the legal process.
- Many are unable to bring their children with them when they migrate domestically for work, this means they are forced to live separately from their children who remain left-behind in their home town.
- There is limited access to friends and relatives who can provide emotional support.
- Younger workers are often better equipped to utilize a factory’s existing dialogue mechanisms than their older peers.
How IETP is helping factory workers

The toy industry works hard to make sure that its products are manufactured in safe work environments which respect the rights and well-being of workers. To support frontline workers at toy factories, many of whom are migrant workers, back in 2010 IETP established a confidential toll-free Worker Helpline service which workers could use to ask any questions related to their work or personal lives.

The Worker Helpline is available to over 713,718 factory workers in 1,777 toy factories participating in the ICTI Ethical Toy Program (IETP), the toy industry's leading ethical manufacturing program.

The purpose of the IETP Worker Helpline is to inform, educate and empower workers so they can effectively manage work-related issues and their personal lives. It also provides a confidential grievance mechanism, when needed. Workers typically use the service to obtain information about appropriate overtime wages, labor contracts, social insurance, pension plans or paid maternity leave to be sure they are receiving correct pay and benefits under Chinese law. They often seek personal support with relationships, homesickness, health issues or, sometimes, depression.

To ensure workers are aware of the IETP Worker Helpline service, all certified factories are required to post information about worker's rights and the Helpline in public areas, and to distribute Helpline Cards, which are pocket-size worker information cards that highlight worker's labor rights, and include the toll-free Helpline number. The Helpline Card was recently updated to provide information about the type of support workers can expect when they contact the Helpline.

A total of 1,582,000 Helpline Cards have been distributed to approximately 1,777 factories covered in the Helpline program since the Helpline launched in June 2010.

Factories are required to distribute Helpline cards to all their workers to obtain IETP certification.
Helpline Cards distributed to workers in IETP certified factories, available in English or Chinese

All calls are handled by IETP’s dedicated Helpline call handlers who are trained in providing counseling and listening to workers in a friendly and supportive manner. In addition to assisting worker’s with issues related to their work, IETP’s in-house call handlers also help to relieve workers' emotional issues by allowing them to share personal problems and give voice to their feelings.

The Helpline is open 9am to 9pm every day all year round, except the seven days before and after Chinese New Year. If workers call outside of the opening hours, or if the Helpline is busy, the calls are recorded by an auto-answering machine and the caller is promptly called back.

When urgent cases pertaining to factory personnel or labor practices (e.g., withheld wages, personal safety of workers, work stoppage or strikes) are reported, the case is reported to IETP’s Program Monitoring Team based in China. The Program Monitoring Team will investigate and if necessary, will arrange for an on-site visit to assess the situation and determine the appropriate course of action for remedy. If there are serious grievances, violations or compliance issues, IETP works with the factory management to mitigate the conflict or to develop a remediation plan to address the matter.
Total Calls Received by the Helpline (2010-2018)*

**NUMBER OF CALLING FOR 2010-2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Calls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2,724</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*may include multiple calls from the same person

**NUMBER OF ENQUIRIES PEOPLE FOR 2014-2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enquiries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1,328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1,694</td>
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Factories are sometimes understandably wary of subscribing to a worker Helpline service. Based on monthly reports on the volume and nature of calls received, workers use the Helpline service responsibly and abuse it rarely. By allowing workers to raise sensitive issues to management via a third party, this confidential communication channel offered by IETP also acts as a cost-effective mechanism for factories to quickly resolve issues in real time thereby improving worker’s satisfaction and benefitting productivity.

Impact of the Helpline

The reach of the Worker Helpline continues to expand as it gains user confidence and trust. From the time of its launch in April 2010 until December 2018, a total of 15,622 workers inquiries were raised, with 1,003 cases escalated to IETP’s teams on the ground in China for further investigation and remediation.

The main areas of worker inquiries reported in 2018 included general questions about labor law and job-related payment, processes and procedures:

**Top 5 common inquiries (2018)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Grievance</th>
<th>% of Total Calls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Resignation</td>
<td>15.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Delayed payments</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Dismissal / Termination</td>
<td>8.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social insurance</td>
<td>6.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Holiday / Leave application and arrangement</td>
<td>6.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calls are also placed to the Helpline from workers seeking support of a personal nature. Many migrant workers away from home for the first time struggle with homesickness, have relationship problems or need advice about health or hygiene related matters. The Helpline offers personal support that may not otherwise be available.
Examples and testimonials from the Helpline

A thank you call

Our Helpline team received a call from a worker who had recently left a job in an electronics factory to start work at an IETP Certified Toy Factory:

“I used to work in an electronics factory where I often had to work overtime and was treated poorly, but I had no one to talk to about it. I am grateful that my new employer provides this [Helpline] service for us, and I am pleased to see a more caring and supportive environment”

Resolving a misunderstanding about resignation

A worker called the Helpline to tell us he had resigned from his post, but the factory’s HR team would not process his resignation request or issue his final salary payment – the worker had purchased a train ticket to return to his home town and therefore needed to get the matter resolved urgently.

Our Helpline staff contacted the factory and determined that the worker had not followed the factory’s internal resignation procedure which requires workers to submit applications to resign in writing. Our staff liaised with the factory who subsequently agreed to release the worker from their employment and pay the outstanding salary amount due to them. We also provided recommendations to the factory to strengthen internal communications to ensure that workers are aware of the correct procedures for resignation and other issues.

Helping Factory deal with a worker strike

A factory contacted the Helpline for help with an escalating labor dispute related to the factory’s relocation. The factory reported that “workers had heard about our plans to relocate the factory and then began to spread rumors that factory will not follow its legal obligations to provide employees with necessary compensation” These rumors subsequently triggered a day of strikes by all workers in the factory.

Our Helpline staff provided guidance to help the factory improve its communication and worker engagement to ensure all managers are aware of the full details of the decisions made and, where possible, are supportive of these. We recommended that the factory hold a meeting of worker representatives to explain the details behind the factory’s relocation and to seek their consent. We also suggested that the factory create an internal response mechanism to respond to labor disputes and appoint staff trained in employee relations to listen to workers’ concerns and address these. Our actions helped the factory resolve the labor dispute and strengthen communications at the new production site.
Benefits for Workers

The Helpline provides information and personal support for workers and serves as an effective, confidential grievance mechanism which workers can trust and utilize without fear of retribution. Toy factory workers who use the Helpline to build their knowledge of occupational safety issues, labor rights, wages and benefit entitlements under national labor law.

Through the Helpline’s support, workers are better equipped to resolve issues, either directly themselves or via the Helpline - labor disputes have been effectively resolved, back pay provided and living conditions improved. Having independent qualified professionals to confide in ensures that workers receive help both personal and professionally, and that they are protected from retaliation - all of which helps to relieve stressful emotions, improve job satisfaction and positively influence morale and motivation.

Benefits for Factories

The Helpline acts as a communication bridge and effective labor dispute mechanism between factory workers and management. It enables factories to assess real-time situations and, as a result, uncover potential abuses, hazards or other issues that they may have been unaware of but urgently need to address.

Since Helpline operators encourage factory workers to maintain a constructive dialogue with factory management, our Helpline fosters positive and fruitful exchanges between factory management and workers. Factory managers report that the Helpline "improves worker-management relationships, builds trust and increases the ways that workers and management can communicate".

The Helpline paves the way for IETP follow up where necessary - factories can therefore achieve quicker resolution of worker related issues before these escalate. All of these processes help to reduce employee turnover and promote better working conditions. Consequently, factory managers value the Helpline as an integral part of their factory's internal grievance and reporting mechanisms.

Benefits for Toy Brands, Retailers and Licensors

The Helpline provides workers with an alternative vehicle to communicate their personal and work-related concerns in between IETP factory audits and progress visits. Knowing that any serious health, safety or other labor standards issues can be raised by workers via the Helpline for subsequent remedy by the IETP team enables brands, retailers, licensors and vendors to deliver on their responsible sourcing commitments and support the safety and well-being of workers in their supply chain.
A core element of the ICTI Ethical Toy Program

This Helpline supports the effectiveness of IETP, enabling our Program Monitoring team to identify systemic compliance issues. Helpline data and insights are used to determine which issues need reinforcement during IETP audits and factory training programs. The Helpline also supports other IETP programs to promote worker well-being including our successful left-behind children programs in China and work to promote women’s empowerment in India. By engaging factory workers and protecting their interests, the toy industry can confidently assure consumers that its products are manufactured in factories which protect the rights and well-being of workers.