

**Remarks from Tracee Binion, Teacher**  
**Press Conference Addressing OSHA Deficiencies**  
April 26, 2007

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My name is Tracee Binion, I'm a middle school science teacher from Birmingham, Alabama. I'm also one of the more than 8 million public sector workers in this country that is not covered by the OSHA law. It's a disgrace that in this day and age, public workers—including teachers like myself and those who work in public schools —do not have the basic right to a safe and healthy workplace.

I am a living example of the impact that exposure to toxic fumes can have on a perfectly healthy adult, and how having no OSHA coverage leaves public sector workers unprotected with no place to turn.

Before the Fall of 2003, you could say my lungs were in excellent shape—it's kind of a prerequisite for a marathon runner. It's also a helpful attribute for teaching science to middle-school aged children!

Then renovations began at Rudd Middle School. I taught class in a wing that was being expanded. Construction crews used blow torches and chemicals on the inside, and on the outside asphalt fumes ruled the day as workers replaced the roof.

No containment barriers were used, although they did do us the favor of shutting down our ventilation system, supposedly to prevent the spreading of noxious fumes. As it happens, this created negative pressure which actually ***pulled more fumes into the building***, and into my classroom with its inoperable windows. The administration told me that there was nothing that could—or would—be done about providing ventilation

A short time later, I started having symptoms of what felt like a cold that never got better. After one school week, I developed a persistent cough,

and couldn't catch my breath. Another week went by, and I was suffering from headaches, disorientation and shortness of breath. I was later diagnosed with chemical pneumonitis and what's known as "occupational asthma." My doctor told me that I—seventy-five-mile-a-week-running Tracee—had lungs that looked like I smoked heavily for my entire life.

I missed four weeks of school, underwent out-patient breathing treatments, and to this day, I still take several asthma medications. I still like to run, but the marathons that I so enjoyed are a mere memory.

You know, I'm not speaking to you today out of bitterness or anger at my condition—I'm fortunate in so many ways. I'm still healthy, I'm still teaching. What angers me is that so much of this could have been avoided.

If school employees were covered OSHA, we could have complained right away to the agency, gotten an inspection and a citation to the school district to stop exposing staff to hazardous fumes and vapors. Instead, my local union and I spent weeks contacting:

- The Jefferson County Department of Public Health;
- The Alabama State Department of Health;
- The Alabama Department of Environmental Management;
- The Jefferson County Department of Environmental Management;
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta); and the
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) - which *finally* came a month after exposures to assess the damage done to the staff

We also contacted the school board, the superintendent and the head of facilities. **No one would intervene.**

I never in my entire life, felt so helpless, so hopeless.

We finally saw action when my local union called state legislators and the governor's office. It took 2 weeks to shut down the roofing and renovation projects. After three weeks, the governor ordered the school closed and cleaned up before students and staff were allowed back in.

If toxic fumes and bad ventilation can have such an impact on me, a healthy adult, just imagine what we're subjecting our children to! Even if you're callous enough to dismiss my story as "just a hazard of the job," you have to admit it's cruel—no, *monstrous*—to allow school children to be subjected to these risks.

And what happened at my school is just one example of the numerous occupational risks and hazardous exposures found in schools. Our food service workers, bus drivers, custodians, teachers and paraprofessionals have a high rate of back injuries and asthma; and the Department of Justice reports that School employees face a high risk of violent assault, which also heightens the risk of exposure to blood-borne pathogens.

We need universal OSHA coverage for all workers, better, more protective standards and effective enforcement of those standards. Expanding the reach and influence of OSHA not only protects the workers, but ensures that taxpayer services—like schools—are continually staffed by healthy, able-bodied professionals.