

# New York State's COSH Movement: A Brief History

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Michael Lax<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Unions, health and safety activists, and professionals came together to create Coalitions for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH groups) in a number of cities across the United States beginning in the 1970s. The COSHes have played an important and unique role in advocating worker health and safety since that time, through activities including technical assistance, training and education, and campaigns on workplace and public policies. In New York State, activist coalitions created eight COSH groups distributed around the state. This paper presents a history of New York's COSHes based on interviews with key participants. The interviews shed light on the origins of the COSH movement in New York, the development and activities of the COSHes, and the organizational trajectory of individual New York COSHes in response to both extra and intraorganizational challenges. Participants' accounts of these issues may be useful for those seeking to sustain the COSH movement.

## Keywords

occupational health movement, worker safety and health, history of safety and health, COSH groups

## Introduction

Coalitions for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH), known as COSH groups, emerged in a number of cities, primarily in the northeast and

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Family Medicine, State University of New York Upstate Medical University, Syracuse, NY, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Michael Lax, 6712 Brooklawn Parkway, Syracuse, NY 13211, USA.

Email: [laxm@upstate.edu](mailto:laxm@upstate.edu)

Midwest in the 1970s. The COSHes advanced a worker-led challenge to management's assumed prerogative to control working conditions. The COSHes were animated by a group of related ideas: that employers driven by the profit motive did not have a primary interest in controlling workplace hazards; that workers, through their experience and intellectual abilities, had the capacity to recognize workplace hazards; and that workers themselves needed to exercise more control over the workplace if they wanted to create a healthy and safe work environment.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, workers, primarily through unions, were beginning to recognize the technical, scientific, and medical aspects of workplace safety and health, which led them to seek allies among professionals in occupational health and safety and related fields. The typical COSH was, at least initially, a coalition of unionized workers and professionals including industrial hygienists, physicians, nurses, educators, attorneys, and others in the field of public health.<sup>2</sup>

However, this description does not do justice to the nature of these coalitions. Whether worker or professional, it is likely that many participants in the early COSH movement would have described themselves as "activists" of one type or another. The COSHes developed in an era of great social ferment with the civil rights and student and antiwar movements of the '60s giving rise to a wide range of social movements including women's rights, environmental protection, and gay and lesbian rights. In unions, and in workplaces, workers organized in a variety of ways for more power both within their own unions, and against their employers. One of the reasons health and safety emerged as an issue in this context is because activists of various backgrounds recognized it as a way to directly challenge employer, and more generally, corporate power.

As a consequence, many "activist" professionals in the COSH movement were not trained in safety and health but were often experienced organizing around other issues and in other groups. And many worker participants were rank-and-file or low-level officers with perhaps a particular interest in safety and health but also with an interest in building worker/union power in a way separate from union business as usual. Union members who saw their own union as too stuck in its ways and failing to challenge management's power were attracted to a young and energetic COSH. In this milieu, health and safety work had a technical/medical component, but its political core was front and center.

Another aspect of the development of the COSH movement was its relationship to the passage of the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSH Act) in 1970. The labor movement was instrumental in passing the act. The OSH Act offered the promise of significant new rights for workers, clearly assigned responsibility for ensuring a safe and healthy workplace to the employer, and created a mechanism for workers and unions to use to compel managers to control hazards and protect workers. After the law was enacted, there was considerable enthusiasm among worker health and safety advocates who saw

it as a vehicle for empowering workers. The COSHes developed in this period of energy and optimism, hoping to take advantage of the new law. This energy was heightened after Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976 and appointed Eula Bingham the head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Among her accomplishments was the establishment of the New Directions training grant program which made funding available to unions, academic programs, and COSH groups. This money was important for many COSHes and helped them transition from tiny volunteer organizations to more sustainable organizations with paid staff.

As might be expected in New York State, a state with high union density at the time, activists built a COSH in New York City (NYCOSH). Similar coalitions, armed with some funding and supported by a statewide organizing vision, created COSHes across the state: Western New York COSH (WNYCOSH) in Buffalo, Rochester COSH (ROCOSH) in Rochester, Central New York COSH (CNYCOSH) in Syracuse, Eastern New York COSH (ENYCOSH) in Albany, and Allegheny COSH (ALCOSH) in Jamestown. A few years later, The Labor Coalition in Ithaca developed a health and safety program that transitioned into a COSH, and in Utica, the Mohawk Valley COSH was created. The collective history of these organizations is an important piece of New York's safety and health and labor history; yet, these organizations have left little in the way of organized written material to help preserve that history. This paper is intended as a contribution to the preservation of New York's COSH history and is based on oral histories obtained from people who were, and are, involved with the COSH movement in various ways and in different time periods. It comes at a transitional time for the COSH movement in New York, not least because the two largest COSHes (NYCOSH and WNYCOSH) have recently seen the retirement of their executive directors (EDs) who had served their organizations since their inception over thirty years previously. Additionally, there is a sense of generational turnover as people who have been active with the COSHes as board members or in other capacities have retired or are getting close to it.

Since all histories are partial, it is hoped that this work will be the beginning of efforts to put the New York COSH history together. The COSH movement remains vibrant in significant parts of the state and shows signs of rejuvenation in others. The COSHes have played a unique and essential role in worker health and safety. There is much to be learned from their experiences, including both successes and failures that can inform this ongoing movement.

## **A Note on Method and Sources**

I worked with, and was a board member of, CNYCOSH for many years. From that work, I became acquainted with others associated with COSHes around the state. I used this experience to contact individuals for interviews in Syracuse, Rochester, Albany, Buffalo, Ithaca, and New York City. A key contact in cities

other than Syracuse would refer me to others they felt were important figures in their COSH's history. A total of thirty-five individuals have been interviewed to date. Interviewees, their locations, and dates are all listed in Appendix A.

Interviews were structured from a mix of specific and open-ended questions. The questions were relatively similar for each interviewee but were tailored to the specific COSH they participated with, their role with the COSH, and the time period they were active. Typical interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes, though a few were substantially longer and several were relatively brief. Almost all of the interviews were conducted face to face, with the rest occurring on the phone. All the interviews were recorded.

As the list reflects, interviewees were not spread evenly across the state, and information is accordingly thin or almost nonexistent for several of the COSHes: ALCOSH, ENYCOSH, and Mohawk Valley COSH. Observations about these organizations came from interviewees associated with other COSHes and a few of my own recollections.

## **Origins and Early Support**

New York's COSHes developed over roughly ten years from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. Many interviewees from across the state identified Frank Goldsmith, a Cornell New York City-based health and safety professional, as the crucial catalyst for the COSHes in New York. Goldsmith's vision for the COSHes had several key elements:

- That health and safety could be an important tool for organizing workers;
- That the COSHes should be locally based but form a statewide network; and
- That they should look to the unions as their primary source of support.

Goldsmith was interested in building organizations that were sustainable and that could use limited financial resources to maximum effect. Union support was critical to this effort for several reasons. New York was a relatively heavily unionized state with about 30 percent of the workforce in unions then, compared to some 24 percent overall in the state and 16 percent in the private sector now. Working with the unions would give the COSHes access to a large portion of the workforce. In addition, union representation made it more likely that workers in particular workplaces could take effective action to improve their working conditions. And finally, unions had the financial resources to help support and sustain the COSHes. In contrast, nonunion workers were recognized as frequently working in hazardous conditions and in need of occupational health and safety support. However, being unorganized, their ability and willingness to challenge the employer over health and safety issues was severely compromised. Consequently, COSHes with very limited resources of their own

could end up expending much time and energy with unorganized workers with little to no results to show for their efforts.

Animated with this strategic vision, and armed with a small OSHA New Directions grant, Goldsmith recruited organizers in the major urban areas across the state. Joel Shufro was recruited in New York and Roger Cook in Buffalo. Later, each became the ED of their fledgling organization. Both had previous activist/organizing experience in the anti-Vietnam War and other movements. In addition, COSHes formed in Rochester and Syracuse. The initial task in every city was to organize labor support, signing up local unions to become COSH members. Shufro recalled signing up 250 local unions in a few months. Other COSHes were not only smaller but also relatively successful in attracting local unions.<sup>3,4</sup>

Interviewees from every area gave a sense that the early days of the COSHes were imbued with a lot of energy and excitement. This seemed to be because unions and workers had been awakened for some time about toxic exposures in their workplaces, and with the COSH, they now had a resource of their own to help them figure out what to do about those hazards. In addition, as described earlier, some workers were attracted to the COSHes as worker-based organizations that challenged employer power and control in the workplace.

Industrial unions played a central role in the formation and early years of the COSHes. These unions included the United Steelworkers; United Auto Workers; Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers; and the International Electrical Workers. Service-sector unions including Service Employees International Union, District 1199, Communications Workers, Teamsters (IBT) also played important roles, as did some of the public-sector unions such as American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; Civil Service Employees Association; teachers' unions (New York State United Teachers); and the International Association of Firefighters.

Which specific unions played major roles varied depending on location. The upstate COSHes in Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo were located in medium-sized cities that were relatively heavily industrialized. In Syracuse, the United Steelworkers and United Auto Workers were particularly active, whereas in Rochester, the International Electrical Workers played a prominent role. The working population in the Albany area was less concentrated in heavy industry and more in the public sector. However, General Electric maintained an enormous manufacturing presence in the Albany-Schenectady area, and the International Electrical Workers representing General Electric workers dominated the COSH that developed there.

The New York City milieu was unique in some important ways. The size and density of the city alone set it apart. In addition, New York's economy was more service based than the upstate cities with less dependence on manufacturing. NYCOSH was able to recruit a large number of union locals and regions as

members (more than two hundred at their peak), and the profile of members reflected the underlying economy.

The COSH that developed in Ithaca was also unique. Ithaca has a population of around 10,000, not including the students at the colleges that dominate life in the town (Cornell and Ithaca College). The town has a reputation for generally being more progressive than much of the rest of the state with a history of activism around many issues. In the 1980s, the local unions were organized in The Labor Coalition, with the largest local being the United Auto Workers representing Cornell workers. The Labor Coalition was centrally involved with the formation of the COSH, and for a time, the COSH was actually a program of the Labor Coalition. The Ithaca COSH development came about a little later than the other COSHes after New York State initiated an Occupational Safety and Health Training and Education Program (OSHTEP) in 1986. The Labor Coalition saw the OSHTEP funding broadly as a way to build the local labor movement through health and safety work. Though not formed as an "official" COSH, the organization quickly developed ties with the other COSHes around the state. By the late 1990s, the Labor Coalition had been reorganized into a Central Labor Council and became part of the Area Labor Federation. As a result, the COSH was spun off as a separate entity, renamed the Midstate Service and Education Foundation (MSEF).

With the exception of the Ithaca COSH, the early COSHes garnered their main support from the local labor movement, yet at the same time were viewed with some wariness and kept at a distance by some local union leaders. This was in part simply the result of the COSHes being organizations not directly controlled by labor. But in addition, as described earlier, the COSHes attracted activists from both inside and outside the unions who were eager to challenge management. From some unions' perspectives, this approach might threaten relationships they had built with employers and perhaps challenge some of the ways unions went about their work with management. Some COSH activists, both union members and nonmembers, were injured workers critical of aspects of union action, or lack of it, in support of workers injured on the job, or around health and safety more generally. As the COSHes proved themselves over time to be reliable resources and advocates for workers and unions, these tensions dissipated, though they never completely disappeared.

Health and safety and medical professionals were an important piece of the COSH coalitions. The extent of their involvement with the COSHes varied quite a bit from locale to locale. NYCOSH was able to draw on a large pool of professionals from local universities, medical schools, and from union health and safety staff. WNYCOSH was also able to establish and maintain connections with University of Buffalo- and Cornell-based professionals. These connections were important as resources to call on when workers or unions needed help with medical/technical questions and also to provide COSH educational offerings. In Rochester and Syracuse, professional involvement with the early

COSHEs was much less substantial and unsustainable. Medical student involvement in the first years of the COSH was recalled by interviewees in Rochester but only lasted for a couple of years. In contrast, the legal profession, mostly local Workers' Compensation or labor lawyers, were actively involved with the COSHEs across the state from the outset.

## **COSH Activities**

Interviewees tended to divide COSH activities into technical assistance/training and advocacy campaigns. All of the COSHEs fielded calls from unions and individual workers with questions about particular hazards and ways of controlling the hazard in their workplace. Other common requests included information about health effects of hazards, access to medical resources to determine if medical conditions were work-related, and how to navigate the Workers' Compensation system. COSHEs were also called upon to help strategize the most effective action to impel employers to improve conditions and to figure out if OSHA or other resources might be helpful for the same purpose.

The COSHEs also engaged in training and education, the specifics of which were tailored to local conditions and interests. In the early days, most COSHEs, including those in the smaller upstate cities, had no trouble attracting fifty or more participants to an educational session. Their educational offerings ran the gamut from discussions of specific hazards and issues, such as asbestos, ergonomics, video display terminals, and chemical exposures, to more general concerns, such as using the Workers' Compensation system, and knowing OSHA rights, especially the "Right to Know" what hazardous materials workers were encountering on their jobs. Knowledge was typically linked to strategies for effectively using their rights. Some of the COSHEs organized larger half- or full-day conferences, bringing in national speakers and attracting a large group of participants. Technical assistance and training/education activities were crucial to the COSHEs achieving credibility as expert resources in the labor community.

What interviewees called advocacy campaigns were crucial to achieving the vision Goldsmith and others had in mind for the COSHEs, using health and safety as a vehicle to increase workers' abilities to exert control over their working conditions. While all the COSHEs agreed with this general idea, the extent to which they incorporated this into their work varied and changed over time. The first campaign NYCOSH and WNYCOSH engaged in was a successful effort to defeat a proposal introduced by Senator Lowell Schweiker that would have gutted the U.S. OSHA. Struggle over workers' "Right to Know" what they were exposed to on the job was another early major focus. The failure to enact a Right-to-Know standard federally caused advocates to push for state laws. In New York, the COSHEs were important participants in the drafting and passing of a Right-to-Know law. In New York City, NYCOSH became heavily

involved in a campaign to reduce health risks from video display terminals, ultimately failing in an attempt to pass legislation.

In the mid-1980s, the COSHes invested significant energy organizing around two issues that would have lasting and profound impact for the COSHes and the development of an occupational health and safety infrastructure in New York State. Interviewees in New York City, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo all agreed that developing a worker-friendly occupational health clinic in their area was a top priority from early on. This coalesced into an effort to create a statewide occupational health clinic network, which NYCOSH spearheaded. A remarkable organizing effort that involved unions, safety and health activists, and professionals from across the state culminated in the successful passage of legislation to fund an occupational health clinic network originally consisting of six centers, and later expanded to eight. The network would be funded by a surcharge on employers' Workers' Compensation insurance premiums. Focused on the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of occupational disease, the occupational health clinic network remains, after almost thirty years, an ongoing achievement of this organizing effort.<sup>5-8</sup>

As part of the campaign for an occupational health clinical network, the COSHes also successfully advocated for the creation of a public pot of money to be used for OSHTEP. The OSHTEP was to be funded through the same mechanism as the occupational health clinic network. The total annual OSHTEP fund has been maintained at about \$6 million.<sup>9</sup> It was envisioned that these resources would be distributed to employer, union, and community organizations across the state through a competitive grant process. An appointed board was established consisting of five members who would evaluate grant applications and make funding decisions. All of the COSHes successfully applied for OSHTEP funding, and interviewees were unanimous in their assessment that this funding was crucial to the development and sustainability of the New York COSHes. This funding has remained the single most important source of funding for the COSHes.

The COSHes forged relationships with the occupational health clinics, some more fruitful than others. In New York City, Rochester, and Syracuse, COSH staff served on the clinics' advisory boards and clinic staff fulfilled similar duties with the local COSH. The COSHes used the clinics as technical resources, called on clinic staff to provide COSH educational and training offerings, and collaborated on various advocacy campaigns or events like Workers' Memorial Day. Relationships were likely closest in New York City and Syracuse. In Rochester, the clinic was housed at the University of Rochester, whose business orientation and attitudes about working with the nonacademic community often made it difficult for the COSH to exert influence.

Buffalo was the glaring exception to the collaboration between COSHes and local clinics in other parts of the state. Though WNYCOSH had been instrumental in the creation of the clinic, it quickly became estranged, as the clinic's

board implemented a vision that took the clinic far afield from the network's mission of identifying, treating, and preventing occupational disease. Instead of focusing on diagnosing occupational disease in high-risk groups, the clinic focused on routine and employer-based compliance and pre-employment examinations. The rift led to a complete severing of relations between the COSH and the clinic with essentially no communications for more than twenty-five years. The Buffalo area labor movement also split over the issue with a portion backing the clinic and the rest allying with WNYCOSH. The result was unfortunate for WNYCOSH and workers in the Buffalo area as they lacked access to worker friendly occupational health clinical resources. In 2013, a new clinic was established in Buffalo with critical support from WNYCOSH. The new clinic outcompeted the original clinic for the grant funding for that region and professed a vision consistent with the network's original mission. Hopes were high among WNYCOSH staff for the development of a collaborative relationship.

Though most of the COSHes' work was local, there were attempts to relate to and coordinate with other COSHes in New York State and nationally. WNYCOSH and NYCOSH long-termers recalled relatively regular statewide COSH meetings where staff would fill each other in on local activities, offer support to each other, and develop statewide health and safety campaigns. These gatherings petered out sometime in the early or mid-1990s.

Nationally, the COSHes have also sought to organize themselves. Until the early 2000s, these efforts were without a formal organizational structure. The goals of a national network included marshaling the collective voice of the COSHes into a more politically potent power; informing the COSHes of each others' doings; and allowing them to share creative strategies.<sup>10</sup> The national network helped link members to allies outside the COSH movement such as members of the American Public Health Association or the Highlander Center in Tennessee. The network was formalized into the National COSH organization in 2003. Of the New York COSHes, WNYCOSH and NYCOSH placed the most importance on devoting resources into building a national network. They have consistently played a leadership role and have been important in the resurgent vibrancy of the organization in recent years. The other COSHes' relationship to a national network was more variable. CNYCOSH showed little interest in participating in a national network after the early 1990s. In contrast, MSEF has in recent years become a more active participant in the National COSH.

The COSHes have also varied in their engagement with other activists pursuing efforts that are related to health and safety but extend beyond a more narrow focus on preventing occupational illnesses, injuries, and fatalities. For a number of years in the early and mid-1990s, CNYCOSH and WNYCOSH were centrally involved in the creation of a statewide Labor Environment Network. The Labor Environment Network held well-attended statewide conferences and

attracted a range of labor and environmental groups including the State AFL-CIO. Taking the work and ideas of Tony Mazzocchi, a pioneering health and safety activist from the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers as inspiration, the Labor Environment Network campaigned to bring labor and environmentalists together by recognizing their interests in protecting worker and community health while acknowledging the need to preserve and create healthy work. These ideas were embodied in a proposal for a “Superfund” for workers that would create funding to help workers who lost their jobs when a hazardous plant closed for environmental reasons get training for transition to other work. The “Superfund” for workers was a bridge that allowed environmentalists and workers to collaborate in efforts to reduce toxic exposures, particularly where workers and their families faced the same hazards on the job and in their nearby homes.

Every COSH has sought to maintain ties with the local labor movement in their area. And, as a result, every local labor council saw the COSH as “their” organization, though in Buffalo this was tempered somewhat by the split over the local occupational health clinic. The COSHes generally supported local labor initiatives and have been successful in obtaining recognition by the local labor movement of Worker Memorial Day as an annual labor event.

In Buffalo, WNYCOSH has pursued a strategy that goes beyond the official labor movement to establish and sustain relationships with local environmentalists and others in various social and economic justice organizations and activities. WNYCOSH’s efforts, particularly around Love Canal in Niagara Falls, not only helped labor to understand the community’s environmental concerns but also stimulated community-based environmental activists to take worker health and safety risks seriously. Expending resources on these activities that often included nonunion and marginalized workers separated WNYCOSH to some degree from the almost exclusively union-based approach advocated by Goldsmith originally and pursued by NYCOSH for many years.

The other important set of relationships the COSHes pursued was political, with their local state legislators in the assembly and senate. These relationships were important not only to maintain support for the Hazard Abatement Board and OSHTPEP funding but also to provide additional funding with “member items” the legislators could distribute. WNYCOSH and NYCOSH were successful in building bipartisan support for the COSHes. This was important as New York State government was mostly divided during the last thirty-five years with a Democratic Assembly and Republican Senate. The initial legislation creating the OSHTPEP and Occupational Health Clinics was signed by a liberal Democratic governor. Subsequently, George Pataki, a Republican governor committed to shrinking government and reducing regulations was elected to three terms, making legislative support for the COSHes all the more important, as activists resisted efforts to reduce OSHTPEP funding.

There was a consensus among interviewees that the nature of their activities had changed over time. Some of these changes were related to the requirements of the OSHTEP funding that sustained them. Interviewees spoke of their work as becoming more technical and less political, spending more time on technical assistance and formal training, as opposed to more advocacy-oriented campaigns. However, the COSHes varied markedly in the proportion of time and energy devoted to advocacy/campaigns versus technical assistance/training. Both ROCOSH and CNYCOSH were more oriented toward servicing local unions. Over time, CNYCOSH also developed relationships with employers for whom they provided fee-for-service training. By the end of CNYCOSH's organizational life, activities were almost exclusively focused on training. In contrast, WNYCOSH and NYCOSH continued to pursue broader, often legislative goals. Safe needles, workplace violence, and safe lifting laws were all passed with support from these COSHes. In addition, the COSHes participated in broader campaigns to improve working conditions through support of legislation to address wage theft and to increase the minimum wage. Workers' Compensation has also perennially been on the agenda for NYCOSH and WNYCOSH.

In more recent years, the surviving COSHes (NYCOSH, WNYCOSH, and MSEF) have shifted their activities in significant ways to respond to changing conditions of work and the altered union landscape. This was reflected in the COSHes developing a focus and building expertise on specific issues of local concern. In Buffalo, WNYCOSH devoted significant resources to addressing safe patient-handling issues in hospitals, nursing homes, and other facilities.<sup>11</sup> Results of these efforts have included implementation of model or near model safe patient-handling programs in some Buffalo area workplaces. These successes informed WNYCOSH's advocacy for safe patient-handling legislation that was eventually passed. NYCOSH played a major role in advocating for an appropriate health and safety response to the World Trade Center attack on 9/11, and the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. Through its actions around these events, the organization developed expertise on health and safety disaster response issues and greatly increased the visibility and credibility of NYCOSH beyond labor in the New York City area.

Another common element of the three remaining COSHes is the relationships they have built with local Worker Centers. Nationally, Worker Centers have arisen in many cities to advocate for the vast majority of workers who are not union members.<sup>12</sup> In very large cities like New York, a number of Worker Centers have developed, some representing workers in a particular industry (e.g. the Restaurant Opportunities Center), others a specific immigrant community, and others advocating more broadly (e.g. Make the Road New York). Over time, NYCOSH has established contacts and ongoing activities with many of these organizations, often focused on building the health and safety capacity of the Worker Centers.

In Ithaca and Buffalo, the COSHes and the Worker Centers were much more intertwined. The Tompkins County Workers' Center has become the hub of worker organizing in the Ithaca area. The individuals involved with the COSH have also been active with the Workers' Center as staff and volunteers. As a result, health and safety has gotten increased recognition and energy, with particular efforts toward reaching farm workers, immigrants, and construction workers. In Buffalo, the Workers' Center was initiated as a WNYCOSH project and has the typical Worker Center focus on nonunion and immigrant workers. From a health and safety standpoint, as in Ithaca, the close relationship with the COSH helps keep worker health on the agenda and potentially brings the COSH into contact with workers who are traditionally very hard to reach.

Over the last couple of years, the COSH groups have received assistance for their activities through the initiatives of an unexpected source: New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo. NYCOSH had been working for more than ten years attempting, with limited success, to address hazards in the nail salon industry. After a *New York Times* expose on the horrific working conditions in many nail salons, the governor responded with new regulations that include ventilation and other health and safety-related requirements. Subsequently, the governor convened a task force of government agencies along with an advisory group of labor, employer, and community representatives to identify illegal, dangerous, and unjust working conditions in fourteen specific industries. Most of the workers in these industries are nonunion and relatively low wage. One outcome is the creation of a five million-dollar fund for training, education, and intervention on health and safety conditions in these industries. These initiatives have opened up opportunities for the COSHes which will play out in the coming years, if the state continues to put resources into meeting the needs of high-risk underserved workers that the COSHes have identified as important groups to be reached.

## **Sustainability, Success, and Failure**

Understanding the key elements contributing to the success or failure of the New York COSHes is important for those seeking to sustain existing COSHes and build new ones. The hallmark of a successful COSH is an ability to both adhere to the original COSH vision of a labor-based organization focused on achieving safer and healthier working conditions through the empowerment of workers' themselves and to adapt to changing economic, political, and intra-organizational changes. The survival of NYCOSH and WNYCOSH for more than thirty years, and MSEF for just a few years less, attests to an effective strategy. The demise of CNYCOSH, ROCOSH, ALCOSH, and ENYCOSH demonstrates the opposite.

### *The Extraorganizational Milieu*

All of the COSHes have had to confront a common set of challenges over the years since their inception. The most important has been a decline in the labor union movement, both in terms of numbers and influence. Statewide union density when the COSHes were formed was estimated to be about 30 percent. Some areas, like Buffalo/Niagara Falls, were much more highly unionized. All of the upstate cities—Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany—were industrial centers with large manufacturing plants. The industrial unions representing workers in those plants played key, and sometimes dominant, roles in creating and sustaining the early COSH movement in New York. Interviewees from all parts of the state agreed that there has been a tremendous shift in the intervening years since then, with manufacturing plants closing and union locals disappearing.

For the COSHes, the disappearance of a foundational part of their base had important implications. The focus of COSH trainings and technical assistance shifted to service- and public-sector workers. Financially, the COSHes lost income as their union membership base shrunk. And politically, the COSHes suffered from the reduced clout carried by the bigger industrial union locals.

The public-sector unions, including Civil Service Employees Association, Public Employees Federation and New York State United Teachers, were all active COSH supporters in most areas of the state. However, these unions also took advantage of OSHTEP and other funding to build their own health and safety programs. As a consequence, their need for the COSHes with regard to trainings and technical assistance was significantly reduced. Overall, several COSHes reported difficulties in finding enough opportunities to provide union trainings which could make it difficult to fulfill the numbers required by the OSHTEP grants. In fact, MSEF decided to forgo applying for OSHTEP funding for a number of years due to lack of local union interest in trainings. CNYCOSH was perennially scrambling to locate workers to train.

Each COSH, at some point, recognized a need to enlarge their base by seeking to address the needs of nonunion workers, who make up an increasing majority of workers in the state. As noted earlier, WNYCOSH had pursued this strategy from its inception, whereas NYCOSH took steps in this direction much later. MSEF was rejuvenated by the development of the Tompkins County Workers' Center. In contrast, CNYCOSH never really altered its labor strategy. Instead, the organization sought to maintain training numbers by finding employers interested in free, or sometimes fee-for-service, training.

A second major challenge was New York's political scene. New York's state government has typically been divided, with Democrats controlling the Assembly, Republicans dominating the Senate, and the governor from alternating parties. The governor plays the major role in setting the agenda and tone. From 1975 until 1995, the period of COSH formation and the successful

campaign for OSHTEP funding, the governor was a Democrat, and from 1983 to 1995 Mario Cuomo, an iconic postwar liberal, occupied the position. All of the governors following him have reflected the national turn away from liberalism and toward a neoliberal agenda. George Pataki was elected in 1995, and though today he is seen as a moderate Republican, at the time of his election, he was viewed as a conservative extremist, committed to reducing government's size and role, reducing taxes, and improving the business environment in the state. The Democrats who have followed Pataki since 2007 (Eliot Spitzer, David Paterson, and Andrew Cuomo) have remained primarily committed to a business-friendly New York without an equal commitment to labor and its issues. It should be noted, however, that, as described briefly earlier, in the past couple of years, Andrew Cuomo has become more progressive on labor issues, taking up the causes of employee misclassification as independent contractors, wage theft, a \$15-an-hour state minimum wage, and other issues of low-wage work.

The state's budget and legislative agenda have depended famously on the "three men in a room" meetings of the governor, assembly, and senate leaders. During the Pataki years, this arrangement served to blunt some of his more radical desires to defund and shrink government, as the Democratic Assembly held the line. Conversely, with Democrats holding the governor's office, the Republican Senate has served as a barrier to prolabor measures. These differences should not be overstated, however. Legislators, whether Democratic or Republican, all operate with their ears attuned to the state's business' needs, narrowing the potential field of legislative action. New York is not unique in this regard as the political spectrum has shifted strongly to the right nationally over this same time period, but overall, New York State's elected government remains somewhat more "liberal" than much of the rest of the country.

From its inception until the mid-1990s, the COSH movement in New York has demonstrated a sense of possibility and optimism. The success of the campaign for OSHTEP funding created a resource stream that seemed to provide a secure financial footing for the COSHes. Pataki's election in 1995 was a rude awakening as it seemed likely that OSHTEP would come under threat. Though OSHTEP was not reduced or eliminated, the COSHes were forced to use time and resources to organize to protect the program, and their posture shifted from a more confident exploration of possibilities to defending what had already been achieved.

As noted earlier, virtually all of the interviewees lamented the COSHes' shift away from advocacy campaigns and toward what they characterized as more technical activities: providing technical assistance, training on specific hazards and controls. Pataki may not have been able to reduce OSHTEP support but certainly created an atmosphere that made COSHes reluctant to pursue activities that might be perceived as antagonistic by the governor. In addition, the OSHTEP grants were made more constraining by strictly limiting the types of

activities the grants would fund. On an administrative level, the OSHTEP grants are quite demanding, requiring a high degree of reporting, vouchering, and oversight from the grant managers. Finally, the total amount in the OSHTEP fund is fundamental to whether the COSHes are able to expand, just tread water, or contract. Flat funding for many years has increased competition for funds and has prevented meaningful expansion of staff and activities.

Other factors confronting the COSHes have been geography, demographics, and local labor and social justice politics. The larger the city or metropolitan area, then logically, the larger the pool of potential COSH staff, activists, professionals, unions, and workers who might be interested in workplace safety and health. In New York City, NYCOSH has been able to recruit knowledgeable and experienced health and union activists, Workers' Compensation attorneys, and professionals affiliated with local universities like Mount Sinai. Individuals affiliated with NYCOSH are frequently prominent in their unions, in city or statewide politics, or in their professional fields. One of the impacts is that these elements allow the NYCOSH Board to be confident in its views about health and safety and what a COSH is supposed to do, independently of the COSH ED.

Of the three medium-sized upstate cities—Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse—WNYCOSH has been the most successful in developing a core of long-term labor support, dedicated Workers' Compensation attorneys, and industrial hygienist/technical resources. They have supported WNYCOSH's direction, provided political backing, and staffed many trainings. In Rochester and Syracuse, the pools of potential members and supporters were even smaller. A considerable number of the union people were not top officials of their locals. Whether they were union officials or not, board members and activists were often part of a relatively small circle of people interested and involved with many community and political issues and occupied with the obligations of those involvements. The impacts on the COSH groups included diminished influence in the labor movement and diminished political influence overall. Rank-and-file union members did not hold the same sway in their unions as the elected officials. Union members and activists stretched in many directions often had other priorities that took precedence over workplace safety and health. Because the pool was relatively small, especially in Syracuse, there was little turnover of the COSH's board. Consequently, the board tended to become insular over time, set in its views of how things ought to be done, and not open to new ideas or directions. Finally, it was difficult to call on busy board members to devote time to the organization beyond monthly board meetings. As a result, the boards relinquished control of key board activities: setting the overall direction of the COSH's activities and supervision of the ED. In CNYCOSH's case, for example, much board time was spent on personnel issues and conflicts between the ED and staff, and on scrambling to meet payroll and other obligations at the end of each grant year. The ED wrote the OSHTEP

grant which determined the vast bulk of the COSH's activities virtually alone, and it was often submitted without board review or input.

Ithaca is by far the smallest city to sustain a COSH. The city is something of an anomaly in New York State in that it is dominated by universities (primarily Cornell) and many in town are university students, alumni, or staff. This has given the town a very politically progressive reputation and enlarges the potential pool of activists. In addition, the Tompkins County Workers' Center has successfully stimulated labor- and worker-oriented energy and activity, with health and safety getting more attention as a result.

### *The Intrainstitutional Milieu*

All of the COSHes needed to respond to the extra organizational challenges described above. They were also forced to deal with the specific intraorganizational issues of their COSH. How well the ED, staff, and board were able to come together, see, and adjust to the challenges posed determined the COSH's success or failure. NYCOSH and WNYCOSH have proven themselves to be relatively visionary and adaptable.

The ED has played a crucial role in every COSH. The ED's job includes both the day-to-day management of staff, budget, and activities and responsibility for envisioning and defining the organization's mission and direction. The ED has to effectively interact with the board, encouraging members to contribute their skills to the organizational effort and recruits new promising members. The ED also has major responsibility for connecting the COSH to others beyond the walls of the COSH office. Potential connections and relationships the ED ideally should nurture include local labor unions and Labor Councils; union, academic, and other health and safety activists; Workers' Centers; Workers' Compensation attorneys; and others in the community doing work that overlaps and is engaged in improving working conditions and working people's lives. The ED is also responsible for developing relationships with local politicians, especially on the state level, since this is where the major organizational funding source is located. The totality of these connections can be seen as the extent of the root system each organization was able to establish in its local community and statewide. A deep, dense root network provides crucial support that determines the organization's sustainability.

Both NYCOSH and WNYCOSH were fortunate to have very effective EDs, both of whom were in their positions for more than thirty years. Both Joel Shufro in New York and Roger Cook in Buffalo were able to use their skills to build organizations with a stable, far-reaching foundation. In Ithaca, the COSH has a less formal structure, but as in New York and Buffalo, the core leaders share a long-term passionate commitment to the organization spanning several decades and allowing for the development of long-term community relationships.

The talents and size of the COSH staff are also key intrainstitutional elements. NYCOSH, by dint of its location, has a relatively large pool of health- and safety-trained people to choose from and has been able to attract and keep highly skilled individuals. The NYCOSH staff is much larger, and staff members have more specialized roles than at any of the other New York COSHes. WNYCOSH has never had more than a couple of people on staff and has chosen to rely on outside consultants to help out on trainings and projects. Like the ED, core WNYCOSH staff has been extremely stable, and the staff member who took over the ED job after Roger Cook retired has been with the organization almost as long as he has. Ithaca's staff has always been very small and usually part time. Core Ithaca COSH supporters have often moved fluidly between staff, board, and volunteer positions without a lot of the formality of the larger COSHes.

The organizational board is the third crucial element in the trajectory of the COSH. There is no doubting the commitment of board members at every COSH, many of whom served, and continue to serve, for many years. They are volunteers, usually people who lead very busy lives with myriad work and community commitments. Yet, they believe in the necessity of a COSH approach to health and safety, and they will dependably put in the time needed to maintain the organization. However, the boards differed considerably in their health and safety experience, in their perspectives, and in their organizational abilities. In addition, the flip side of the virtue of a cadre of committed, long-serving board members is that it can limit opportunities for new members and fresh ideas. The board can become entrenched in a certain way of doing things based on tradition and experience. This can be limiting as the organization continues to face the challenges of ongoing change in the context within which they work. Interviewees also pointed out that at times the COSH board was discomforted by the political turmoil caused by certain COSH activities. An example was CNYCOSH's very public role in bringing public awareness of the hazardous exposures faced by workers building a large mall on top of a former industrial waste site in Syracuse. The organization's stance caused some tension with the building trades unions and with local government and other prodevelopment forces. Over time, these differences shaped the roles the COSH boards were able to play in their respective locales.

Part of the success of NYCOSH and WNYCOSH is due to the quality of their boards who actively participated in the organization's affairs and activities and who were also effective advocates for the COSH in their own organizations, communities, and with their political connections. Though there may have been some rough patches, in general, the successful COSHes were also characterized by close relations between the ED and the board. This allowed the ED and board to be in sync with each other with a shared vision and agreed upon strategy for moving the organization effectively forward.

The less successful COSHes provide a contrast to NYCOSH and WNYCOSH on all of these elements. CNYCOSH and ROCOSH's histories provide examples of the key role of the ED in the organization's trajectory. Neither organization was able to attract a strong, competent ED for a sustained period. This is not meant to denigrate the skills that some EDs brought to each organization, but to point out that no ED stayed for too long. The reasons EDs left varied and included friction with the board and/or staff; the precarious financial situation of the organization; and difficulties handling the administrative demands of the OSHTEP grant. In addition, it seemed that CNYCOSH and ROCOSH never got to the point where the salary and benefits of the ED job were enough to make it a career option. Instead, for some EDs the job served as a stepping stone, allowing them to develop experience and connections that they parlayed into a better paying, more secure, job elsewhere.

### *A Summary of Organizational Trajectories*

As already noted, the New York COSHes have had vastly different organizational trajectories which are summarized below.

NYCOSH, WNYCOSH, and MSEF continue to carry on the original COSH vision. Operating in larger milieus, both NYCOSH and WNYCOSH have benefited from strong, long-term EDs, both with tenure more than thirty years, with vision and political savvy. In addition, the organizations have recruited skilled staff, many of whom have been long term. The boards have included dedicated and experienced individuals. This combination has lent stability to these organizations. Both organizations have risen to the challenges of the changing political, workplace and labor environments by refocusing efforts and making new community connections.

In contrast, MSEF is a tiny organization that operates on a shoestring budget with a small core of long-term committed individuals. The other exceptional feature of MSEF has been how connected the organization has remained to the centers of labor and worker activity and energy in the Ithaca area. Originally, the COSH was a program of the local Labor Coalition, equivalent to a local labor council. As that organization's activity waned, a vibrant Workers' Center eventually emerged, and the COSH has been tightly connected to it.

ALCOSH, ENYCOSH, ROCOSH, and CNYCOSH no longer exist. ALCOSH was the first COSH to cease operations in the mid-1980s. Unfortunately, no interviewees with direct experience with the COSH were located for this project, and no specific information was obtained to describe or explain the organization's trajectory.

Information was also sparse for ENYCOSH which remained in operation until the late 1980s. A couple of interviewees described an organization narrowly focused on one industry and dependent on one staff person, associated with a particular union local. Available information is inadequate to determine the

exact factors leading to the organization's end. However, it is reasonable to speculate that, lacking a base of support, if the one staff person lost interest, energy, or support from within his own union, the organization would not be able to survive.

ROCOSH enjoyed broad local labor support but was brought down relatively abruptly in the early 2000s following an intense conflict between the ED and board. CNYCOSH's demise was more prolonged and complicated. By the end, around 2012, plagued by chronic financial troubles, ED instability, and staff/board conflict, the organization was exhausted.

## **Recent Developments**

### *Changing of the Generational Guard*

Both Joel Shufro and Roger Cook, the original EDs at NYCOSH and WNYCOSH respectively, retired in the last few years. Their retirement marks the end of an era as the generation involved with the COSH since its inception, profoundly creating, shaping, and sustaining the organizations and the movement, leaves the scene. The hiring of Charlene Obernauer, who has a community-based worker advocacy background as the next ED at NYCOSH, signals a shift in approach. In Buffalo, the situation is a little different as the current ED, Germaine Harnden, is a long-time staff person and colleague of Roger Cook, while Cook himself remains actively involved in the organization.

### *Rebirth and New Initiatives*

New COSH organizations are developing in Albany and Syracuse, reflecting renewed energy, and the new workplace and labor realities. In Albany, the effort to develop Northeast New York Council on Occupational Safety and Health has been spearheaded by veterans of the local OSH community without, as yet, any significant funding to speak of. The COSH is attempting to establish ties and create some excitement among the local labor community while at the same time being attentive to the needs of nonunion workers in the area.

In Syracuse, the scene has developed differently as the Greater Syracuse Council on Occupational Safety and Health (GSCOSH) was created out of the ashes of CNYCOSH. One of CNYCOSH's staff members was able to obtain a small OSHTEP grant and maintain enough employer contacts to continue offering OSH (occupational safety and health) training. Independently, both the Occupational Health Clinical Center and the Syracuse-based Central New York Workers' Center established nonformalized relationships with the national COSH organization. The three organizations came together to form a collaborative coalition: the Central New York Coalition for Workers' Health. The coalition formed to augment the activities of each of the individual

participating organizations in a collaborative way. In this way, resources could be maximized and the effects could hopefully be amplified.

Both of the new COSHes are in the fledgling stage, yet to be fully defined, and not yet assured of stability or staying power. Both, however, have affiliated with the national COSH, signaling an intent to develop and remain in the established COSH tradition.

Though it remains to be seen if the funding and other efforts initiated by Governor Cuomo directed at the low-wage worker groups will be sustained, the effort so far has had positive effects on the COSHes. It has offered a new source of funding for important activities which will solidify the OSH infrastructure if the funding becomes continuous. It has also encouraged collaborations between organizations. And it has generally imbued the OSH movement with renewed energy.

### *The Rise of Trump*

The election of Donald Trump portends some important possible challenges for the COSHes in New York. Funding could be threatened in at least two major ways. Some of the COSHes receive funding from OSHA's Susan Harwood grants which may very likely be cut back or ended. Less directly, if federal spending is generally cut, and austerity imposed on the states, New York's budget will become tighter and funding for various programs deemed lower priority likely cut. This could put a quick end to the governor's recent vulnerable worker initiative, as well as pose a threat to the OSHTEP funds the COSHes depend on.

Other Trump effects may not be so direct. His cabinet nominees are generally committed to a harsher neoliberal approach: antiregulatory, antiunion, antigovernment spending, and antimeddling with the free market. In this climate, workers and their allied organizations will have their hands full just trying to defend the status quo against attack. OSH will likely diminish as a priority. Substantial weakening of OSHA's whistleblower protection efforts can also be anticipated. If workers, especially unorganized workers, have been reluctant to come forward with OSH complaints and demands until now, that reluctance will be greatly amplified, driving these issues further underground and unattended.

Anticipated sharp attacks may breed fear and silence but will also provoke resistance. This has been evident already, since the election, as many have been mobilizing and organizing for the anticipated struggles ahead. The COSH movement nationally is seeking to play a role in this pushback and has developed a national health and safety agenda. By making Trump's antiworker and antisafety and health agenda clear, the COSHes can help reclaim some of the working class support Trump has captured.

## Conclusions/Ongoing Challenges

Nationally, the COSH movement has played a key role in worker safety and health since the 1970s. The first COSHes were formed in the Midwest and east in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Wisconsin, Maine, and North Carolina. Others, including the West Coast, followed. By the late 1970s, the COSHes were networking nationally, and in the mid-1980s, they began meeting annually to coordinate strategies and campaigns.<sup>13</sup> Strengthening the OSH act, resisting efforts to deregulate safety and health, advocating for an ergonomics standard, and developing efforts to reach vulnerable workers in high-risk jobs were some of the major activities pursued nationally. In 2003, the COSHes formalized the network with the creation of the national COSH nonprofit organization. Currently, there are fifteen COSH groups, most continuing to be located in the northeast, along with Wisconsin and California. In addition, there are six associate members, who are “newly forming coalitions” doing health and safety work and will hopefully develop into full-fledged COSHes. Four of the six are in the south and one is in the west where COSH organizations have not existed previously. The national COSH network has a website with information about the network, links to its members, and current news.<sup>13</sup>

The New York State COSHes have been important contributors to this ongoing national effort. NYCOSH, WNYCOSH, and MSEF have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to local conditions and sustain themselves for decades. They have established themselves as respected resources and advocates not only among their core base of support in the labor movement but also among legislators, and more recently among workers who are not union members. As a consequence, New York State has a relatively strong and developed proworker health and safety infrastructure.

At the same time, the COSHes remain fragile organizations. In smaller cities like Rochester, organizational history shows that difficulties with just one ED can bring the organization down. But even in larger cities like Buffalo, or the largest city of all, New York, the organizations remain greatly dependent on the personalities and skills of the ED and core board members. And despite some diversification of funding sources, even the largest COSHes remain heavily dependent on OSHTEP funding, without which they would have trouble

surviving, let alone trying to maintain current staffing and activities. The challenges for the COSHes are persistent and none can afford to let their organizational guard down.

The COSHes will continue to need to adapt to their external milieu. Maintaining a union base of support remains a crucial task, but as union membership continues to decline, the need to reach nonunion members and the community organizations serving and allied with them will remain key. The need to maintain funding also remains critical, requiring attention to simultaneously maintain and strengthen the political connections that keep the OSHTEP funds flowing while continuously looking for ways to diversify funding sources. To remain relevant to workers, the COSHes will have to continue anticipating and engaging emergent important OSH issues. And in the immediate years ahead, the COSHes will have to look for allies in a unified resistance to the anticipated policies of the Trump administration.

Internally, the COSHes will face the perpetual task of recruiting skilled EDs and staff, and committed board members, and of meshing the board, ED, and staff into a cohesive, collaborative whole. But beyond this generic need, there is a generational one. Bringing young people into the organizations is an essential task. Many of the veterans on the COSH boards and staffs will reach the end of their working lives in the not too distant future, if they have not retired already. Many of these individuals came out of the social struggles of the '60s and '70s and had a sense that, for many years, the younger generations did not have the same political outlook or commitment. While this may or may not have been an accurate perception, the OSH movement nationally grayed and young recruits were limited. Over the last decade, however, there has been a clear upsurge in politicized young people who have engaged on a range of issues. However, these same young people often see worker safety and health as a medical/technical issue and do not make the connection with workplace and class power dynamics, nor with issues of gender, race, and environment with which it is intertwined. The future of the New York COSHes rests critically on their ability to attract the younger generation.

The staying power of New York's COSH movement is a testament to the ongoing relevance of the original COSH vision as advocates for the idea that workers themselves are essential to efforts to clean up workplaces and prevent death, injury and illness on the job.

## Appendix A

Individuals interviewed ( $n = 35$ )

COSH location	Name	Organizational role	Interview month/year
Syracuse	<i>Anonymous</i>	Board member	February 2015
	<i>Anonymous</i>	Board member	July 2012
	Rosemary Jonientz	Staff/executive director	July 2012
	Heather Keegan	Executive director	July 2012
	Nat Lambright	Board member	July 2012
	Ralph Lyke	Board member	July 2012
	Mike Maestri	Local union leader	July 2012
	Lin Nelson	Staff/coexecutive director	July 2012
	Patricia Rector	Labor/community activist	June 2012
	Ann Marie Taliercio	Labor leader/HAB member	December 2014/ August 2015
	Bob Tompkins	Staff/executive director	July 2012
	Paco Valle	Staff	July 2012
Ithaca	Carl Feuer	Staff/board member	March 2014
	Tom Joyce	Staff/board member	March 2014
	Linda Smith	Staff	March 2014
New York	Jeanne Blomberg	Staff	October 2014
	Frank Goldsmith	Union health and safety	October 2013
	David Kotelchuck	Board member	October 2013
	Maureen LaMar	Staff	October 2013
	Kristina Mazzocchi	Health and safety activist	October 2013
	Steve Mooser	Board member	October 2013
	Charlene Obernauer	Executive director	March 2015
	David Pratt	Staff	October 2013
	Joel Shufro	Executive director	September 2013
	Tony Straka	Staff	October 2013
Buffalo	Dom Tuminaro	Board member	June 2015
	Roger Cook	Executive director	June 2014
	Frank Dulce	Board member	June 2014
	Germaine Harnden	Staff/executive director	June 2014
	Liz Smith	Staff	June 2014
Rochester	Linda Donahue	Staff/board member	October 2014
	Bridget Watts	Executive director	October 2014
	Denise Young	Board member	October 2014
Albany	Matt London	Health and safety activist	June 2014

Note. COSH = Coalitions for Occupational Safety and Health; HAB = Hazard Abatement Board.

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### **Author Biography**

**Michael Lax** is an occupational medicine physician, the medical director of the Occupational Health Clinical Centers, and a professor in the Department of Family Medicine at State University of New York Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. He has been in Syracuse for twenty-nine years. He has been interested in COSH groups since joining the Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (CACOSH) in the mid-1980s.