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New Renaissance store now bars customers, conducts business from the front door. Tribune photo by Roy H. Williams

Mystery illness hits glass workers

By Abby Cohn and David Tong
Tribune Staff Writers

At first, employees at New Renaissance Glass Works in Oakland blamed it on a bad case of the flu.

But the colds, nausea, bloody urine and skin rashes persisted.

On some days in December, only a handful of the business' 22 workers showed up for work. Others got scared and quit.

Now, the owner of the stained glass shop and her workers fear they have found a cause for the mysterious ailments. They believe their warehouse-style building at 5151 Broadway is contaminated, possibly with toxic PCBs.

They are accusing the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration of dragging its heels in an investigation of the problem.

A Cal-OSHA study in March concluded that the PCBs — suspected of causing a variety of ailments — posed no health hazard. The toxic chemical was found in one of several fluorescent light fixtures that overheated and burned late last year.

"I think what they found scared them and they didn't want to go any further," said Lenny Woolfenden, a 24-year-old shipping manager at the store.

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Mystery

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A separate Cal-OSHA investigation is continuing. State environmental experts were scheduled to return to New Renaissance today.

But Thursday, only four workers remained at the shop.

Owner Dianne Laney laid off her remaining five employees Tuesday when a private firm she hired found seemingly high levels of PCBs in the dust inside the building.

Her Salt Lake City-based consultant told her Monday the dust sample she had sent contained PCBs in concentrations of 400 parts per million. Federal guidelines require that any PCB level over 50 parts per million be cleaned up immediately.

As soon as she got the report, Laney notified the Environmental Protection Agency, Cal-OSHA and other agencies that there had been a "toxic spill" at her business.

She has barred any customers from entering the shop since Tuesday. All sales of the multicolored stained glass sheets and Tiffany-style lamps at New Renaissance are conducted at the front door.

A placard has been placed at the entry, reading: "Due to environmental testing we have had to close our building to the public. We will be happy to help you from the door."

When reached Thursday evening, a Cal-OSHA official said he was unfamiliar with the case but would investigate immediately.



Store owner Dianne Laney
Suspects presence of PCBs in shop

"There's obviously something drastically wrong here," said Richard Wade, chief of the agency's health division.

Wade doubted, however, that the levels of PCBs were high enough to cause the illness. The agency reported a 281-parts-per-million concentration in the fluorescent light.

An official at the Utah firm hired by Laney declined to comment Thursday on his study, saying that anything between an employer and the firm was privileged information.

But OSHA's Wade questioned the accuracy of the dust sample.

Still, he said such a level of contamination probably would produce nothing worse than a skin rash.

Laney and at least two other workers said they'd experienced such rashes.

Laney, 37, traces the problems to the overheated fluorescent lights and the gobey black material that dripped when they were removed.

The fires were just one of several bizarre incidents at the shop. Other problems included a leaking gas furnace and broken underground pipes that have buckled the cement floor.

Laney, who rents the building, said she has removed all the old light fixtures and replaced the furnace.

Still, the illnesses have continued, she said.

Currently, two of her workers have pneumonia, and others are suffering from nausea, bladder infections and viral-type infections.

In its report, Cal-OSHA said samples of the air turned up no signs of PCBs.

The investigator who wrote the report said he found traces of lead on some work surfaces. But he said blood tests on the workers later showed no high levels of the substance, which is sometimes used in stained-glass work.

The investigator said he at first suspected carbon monoxide poisoning from the leaking heater. But he noted that the illnesses continued after the furnace was dismantled.

Because it found no hazardous exposures, Cal-OSHA suggested that the case be turned over to state or federal hygienists on a consultation basis.

But Laney and others complain that the Cal-OSHA investigator failed to take tests of any other light fixtures or the material that dripped from them.

"We called OSHA repeatedly to look at this dripping, to see if it could account for all our symptoms," Laney said.

PCBs have been placed in light fixtures, electrical transformers, television sets and other equipment to help conduct electricity.

The chemical has been linked to everything from skin rashes to liver disease. In 1979, the EPA barred its further production.

Laney's eyes welled up and her voice got shaky several times during an interview Thursday.

She called the last seven months a "nightmare."

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