



OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs: Recognizing the Best in Worker Safety and Health

by Judith Weinberg

Sites that achieve VPP Star status fly their Star flags to proclaim their commitment to workplace safety and health. Photo courtesy of National Enzyme Co.

Every industry has its leaders. These are the companies whose commitment to excellence makes them role models in their industry and community. For more than two decades the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has been recognizing leaders in workplace safety and health through its prestigious Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP).

The Partnership Approach

OSHA's premier recognition program started as a novel concept in the early 1980s. VPP would bring together employers, workers and their union representatives, and OSHA in a voluntary, cooperative partnership. It would encourage companies to voluntarily go above and beyond their legal obligations to protect their workers' safety and health. Twenty-one years later, VPP is credited with revolutionizing attitudes about what works best to protect workers.

That's because, as VPP has grown to include 703 worksites under federal jurisdiction, and another 279 sites in VPPs operated by states,¹ these sites have become safer and healthier places to work. Injury and illness rates have dropped, and more than ever before, employees and managers are working together to promote workplace safety and health.

"What makes VPP such a success story," according to Cathy Oliver, Director of OSHA's Office of Partnerships and Recognition, "is that it represents the positive, proactive side of worker protection. VPP is not about enforcement. It's about OSHA working side by side with private companies willing to make the commitment and do what it takes to make their workplaces among the safest in the world—not because they *have* to, but because they *want* to."



Assistant Secretary John L. Henshaw discusses the value of working cooperatively with OSHA at a Voluntary Protection Programs Participants' Association conference in New Orleans. Photo by Kenny Bordelon

OSHA Administrator John L. Henshaw takes pride in telling others that he is the first OSHA Assistant Secretary to come from a VPP company—Monsanto and Solutia. "I deeply appreciate the partnership of VPP," Henshaw told the audience at the 17th annual Voluntary Protection

1. As of July 31, 2003.

Programs Participants' Association (VPPPA)² conference in 2001. "You model excellence for everyone, no matter where they are on the ladder. You demonstrate across a broad array of industries, in businesses of every size, the value that safety and health add to any operation."

Effective Protection Means Going Beyond the Standards

When OSHA first announced VPP in 1982, however, the program had its share of skeptics. Why, some questioned, would employers want to voluntarily contribute time, personnel, money, expertise, and energy to create workplaces where compliance with OSHA standards was treated as just a minimum starting point? And who would voluntarily open themselves up to regular OSHA visits?

"Yet 20 years later, it's become obvious that these employers want their companies to be models of workplace safety and health," says Paula White, OSHA's Director of Cooperative and State Programs. "They have discovered that protecting workers pays off in a lot of ways."



Delta Air Lines is the first major commercial airline to apply for and receive VPP recognition.
Photo courtesy of Delta Air Lines

VPP sites report fewer worker fatalities, injuries, and illnesses; lost-workday rates generally 50 percent below industry averages; and lower workers' compensation and other injury- and illness-related costs than before they joined the program. Sites report other, less tangible benefits, too. Here is what Brian Bennett, Safety Manager

for Star participant Akzo Nobel Polymer Chemicals LLC in Edison, New Jersey, has to say about VPP's impact at his plant:

"Our labor-management relations are much better since the implementation of the VPP process in 1988. The most obvious improvement has been in the area of safety and health, where both parties have worked together resulting in a total recordable incident rate that is 87 percent below the national SIC average. However, we have carried the VPP principles forward to other areas of our business, and we have seen a marked improvement in the overall level of employee participation and involvement in all aspects of the business, such as quality, cost control, manufacturing, and efficiency. Participation in the VPP has not only improved our safety and health, but it has improved our overall employee morale and made us a more competitive business."

How It Works

Getting into VPP isn't easy. A site that applies to OSHA must submit a written application that addresses VPP's major elements: management leadership and meaningful employee involvement in safety and health at the site; analysis of worksite hazards; hazard prevention and control; and safety and health training for everyone at the worksite. OSHA evaluates the site's application and, if it is judged complete and acceptable, sends a team of safety and health experts to conduct an extensive



VPP at a Glance

Star – The Star Program recognizes exemplary worksites that have implemented comprehensive, successful safety and health management systems, and have achieved injury/illness rates below their industry's national average. Star sites are self-sufficient in their ability to control worksite hazards.

Demonstration – In the Demonstration Program, OSHA and worksites with Star quality worker protection test alternatives to current Star eligibility and performance requirements. Over the years, successful Demonstration projects have led to changes in Star requirements and shifts in thinking about what constitutes an excellent safety and health management system.

Merit – The Merit Program is for worksites with good safety and health management systems that need some improvement to be judged excellent. Merit sites must have the potential and commitment to meet specified goals, tailored to the site, and to achieve Star quality within 3 years.

2. The private, nonprofit Voluntary Protection Programs Participants' Association represents the worksites participating in OSHA's VPP and a similar program operated by the Department of Energy. The VPPPA actively promotes workplace safety, health, and environmental excellence.



onsite review. The team's task is to verify that the safety and health management systems described in the application are appropriately tailored to the site's individual needs and operating effectively, and that they meet VPP requirements.

Staying in VPP isn't easy, either. OSHA conducts reapproval evaluations at the sites on a regular basis, every 12 to 18 months for Demonstration participants, every 18 to 24 months for Merit, and every 2.5 to 5 years for Star.

The trust and cooperation that are hallmarks of the relationship between OSHA and its VPP partners can be seen in the positive way sites respond to these OSHA team visits. After undergoing a VPP evaluation in March 2001 at IBM's Thomas J. Watson Research Center, a Star site in Yorktown Height, New York, company managers Carolyn Baresick and Kyle Pero fired off a letter thanking the VPP team for its "professionalism and positive approach." They wrote, "The team that came here really added value with excellent, thought-provoking questions and a strong sense of best practices in the industry. Their recommendations will result in an improved Watson safety program."



International Paper's SuperTree Nursery in Bullard, TX bought tractors with climate-controlled cabs to protect workers from dust and chemical exposure.
Photo by Ricky Martinez

Participating sites also must cast a critical eye on their safety and health efforts by conducting a self-evaluation annually and sending a copy of the self-evaluation report to their OSHA regional office. This evaluation is a careful appraisal of all the elements of the safety and health

management system. It must include injury/illness data and trends for both regular site workers and applicable contractors' employees. The evaluation must discuss improvements made, deficiencies identified, and what the site is doing to correct problems and continually improve. OSHA also asks for worksite success stories that contain useful information the agency can share with other companies.



This ExxonMobil worker is among more than 7,300 employees who benefit from high workplace safety and health standards at the company's three Star sites.
Photo courtesy of ExxonMobil

Despite VPP's rigorous continuing demands, participating sites, once approved, rarely withdraw. Sites that have made the commitment to join say VPP's high standards make it a source of pride among participants. At Alstom Power Inc., Air Preheater Company in Wellsville, NY, the longest continuous Star worksite in VPP, Environmental, Health, and Safety Manager Tom Barnett says this pride "strengthens our focus on safety and health and our dedication to the principles of VPP."

VPP sites become full-fledged partners in OSHA's mission to protect America's workers. They voluntarily share their expertise and experiences, not just with OSHA, but also with their communities and other businesses via outreach activities, including a mentoring program available to any worksite that requests assistance. They generously share their human resources with OSHA by participating in the VPP Special Government Employee (SGE) Program. (See box, page 69.) They are ready to respond when OSHA asks for help, for example, when OSHA invited VPP SGEs to join the teams mobilized after September 11 to oversee the safety of rescue and clean-up workers at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They promote safety and health management systems as a superior way to protect workers. And they demonstrate that management, labor, and a government regulator can work together productively to achieve common goals.



Looking Ahead

As VPP moves into its third decade, it is tackling challenges critical to America's businesses, such as an increasingly diverse workforce, health and safety problems associated with an aging worker population, new hazards emerging at highly technological workplaces, and the need to help small businesses survive and succeed. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, speaking at the VPPPA's 2001 national conference, said, "Finding solutions for the 21st century workforce will require new ways of thinking. And the Department must be guided by common sense, not just a reflexive, one-size-fits-all approach to every situation. That is why the VPP is so important. From large multinational companies to small, single site, family-run businesses, VPP's flexible, performance-based approach can benefit all eligible employers."

OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs demonstrate that cooperation among managers, workers, and OSHA can produce world-class worker protection. VPP promotes voluntary adoption of superior safety and health management systems tailored to the needs of specific workplaces. It employs a strategy that assesses and recognizes exemplary worksites, creates safer and healthier workplaces, encourages meaningful employee involvement, produces significant cost savings for employers, transforms relationships, and creates models of excellence in industries throughout the U.S.

Unfortunately, too few companies in the printing industry are taking advantage of the benefits VPP offers. Only two printing companies are on the roster of VPP worksites recognized for their excellence in worker safety and health: Webcraft Direct Marketing, Inc., in Chalfont, Pennsylvania, and RR Donnelley facilities in Senatobia, Mississippi, and Roanoke, Virginia. OSHA is anxious for additional sites to come forward.

If you think your workplace has what it takes to be one of the best, contact the VPP Manager at your OSHA Regional Office. You can find more information on VPP and OSHA's other cooperative programs at the agency's Web site, www.osha.gov. 

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Special Government Employees: A Vital Part of the Partnership

VPP members have been eager to help OSHA keep the program alive and well. One result is the innovative use of Special Government Employees (SGEs), begun in 1994 as a way to supplement the staff OSHA needs for VPP onsite visits to an increasing number of worksites. Qualified employees from approved VPP sites undergo OSHA training in how to assess workplace safety and health management systems. Upon completion, they are sworn in as SGEs, entitled to participate as full-fledged members of OSHA's VPP evaluation teams. Along with their OSHA colleagues, SGEs visit applicant and member sites to review safety and health documents, interview employees, conduct walkthroughs, and contribute to the team's evaluation report and recommendation. SGEs' salaries and expenses are fully paid by their sponsoring employers.

Paul Villane was the first VPP Special Government Employee. At the time, he was Safety Manager at Monsanto, Inc, Pensacola, FL, a VPP Star site. Now retired from the private sector, Villane continues his service to VPP as Executive Director of the non-profit Voluntary Protection Programs Participants' Association. Villane calls the SGE Program "a boon to both OSHA and the VPP companies that choose to participate." He says, "OSHA and VPP site employees work side by side, sharing what they've learned about worker protection, contributing what are sometimes very different perspectives and approaches, and helping the sites we visit solve real-world problems that make a real difference in employees' lives."

An Alliance in GAA's Future

GAA is discussing with OSHA the potential for signing on to the agency's Alliance Program, with a likely focus on workplace ergonomic issues. In Alliances, which are less structured than VPP and other OSHA cooperative programs, OSHA and its allies jointly define and work toward meeting goals relating to:

- Training and Education
- Outreach and Communication
- Promoting the National Dialogue on Workplace Safety and Health