

Introduction to OSHA – Plain Language Text

Introduction

The *Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970* created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to help employers and employees reduce injuries, illnesses and deaths on the job in America. Since then, workplace fatalities have been cut by more than 60 percent and occupational injury and illness rates have declined 40 percent. At the same time, U.S. employment has more than doubled and now includes over 115 million workers at 7.2 million worksites.

OSHA provides national leadership in occupational safety and health. The agency seeks to find and share the most effective ways to help prevent worker fatalities, and prevent workplace injuries and illnesses.

When employees stay whole and healthy, businesses also benefit. They experience lower workers' compensation insurance costs, reduced medical expenditures, decreased payout for return-to-work programs, fewer faulty products, and lower costs for job accommodations for injured workers. There are also indirect benefits such as increased productivity, lower costs for training replacement workers and decreased costs for overtime.

OSHA's impact

Since OSHA's creation in 1970, the nation has made substantial progress in occupational safety and health. OSHA and its many partners in the public and private sectors have for example:

- Cut the work-related fatality rate to historic lows for 2002 to 2004;
- From 2003 to 2004, reduced the number of workplace injuries and illnesses by 4 percent and lost workday case rates dropped by 5.8 percent in that same period;
- Virtually eliminated brown lung disease in the textile industry;
- In 2005, OSHA conducted close to 39,000 inspections and issued just over 85,000 citations for violations;
- In 2004, the Consultation Program made over 31,000 visits to employers.

OSHA's continuing role

Significant hazards and unsafe conditions still exist in U.S. workplaces. Each year:

- Almost 5,200 Americans die from workplace injuries in the private sector;
- Perhaps as many as 50,000 employees die from illnesses in which workplace exposures were a contributing factor;
- Nearly 4.3 million people suffer non-fatal workplace injuries and illnesses; and
- The cost of occupational injuries and illnesses totals more than \$156 billion.

What OSHA does

OSHA uses three basic strategies, authorized by the *Occupational Safety and Health Act*, to help employers and employees reduce injuries, illnesses, and deaths on the job:

- Strong, fair, and effective enforcement;
- education, and compliance assistance; and
- Partnerships, Alliances and other cooperative and voluntary programs.

Based on these strategies, OSHA conducts a wide range of programs and activities to promote workplace safety and health. The agency:

- Encourages employers and employees to reduce workplace hazards and to implement new safety and health management systems or improve existing programs;
- Develops mandatory job safety and health standards and enforces them through worksite inspections, and, sometimes, by imposing citations, penalties, or both;
- Promotes safe and healthful work environments through cooperative programs including the Voluntary Protection Programs, OSHA Strategic Partnerships, and Alliances;
- Establishes responsibilities and rights for employers and employees to achieve better safety and health conditions;
- Supports the development of innovative ways of dealing with workplace hazards;
- Establishes requirements for injury and illness recordkeeping by employers, and for employer monitoring of certain occupational illnesses;
- Establishes training programs to increase the competence of occupational safety and health personnel;
- Provides technical and compliance assistance, and training and education to help employers reduce worker accidents and injuries;
- Works in partnership with states that operate their own occupational safety and health programs; and
- Supports the Consultation Programs offered by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

. OSHA Coverage

The OSH Act covers private sector employers and their employees in the 50 states and certain territories and jurisdictions under federal authority. Those jurisdictions include the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Wake Island, Johnston Island, and the Outer Continental Shelf Lands as defined in the *Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act*.

The OSH Act covers employers and employees either directly through Federal OSHA or through an OSHA-approved state program.

Who is not covered

The OSH Act does not cover:

- The self-employed;
- Members of immediate family of farm employers that do not employ outside workers;
- Worker conditions that are regulated under worker safety or health requirements of other federal agencies;
- Employees of state and local governments; some states have their own occupational safety and health plans that cover these workers.

Federal worker coverage

Section 19 of the OSH Act makes federal agency heads responsible for providing safe and healthful working conditions for their employees. OSHA conducts federal workplace inspections in response to employee reports of hazards.

The OSH Act also requires federal agencies to comply with standards consistent with those for private sector employers. Under a 1998 amendment to the Act, it covers the U.S. Postal Service the same as any private sector employer.

State and local government worker coverage

OSHA provisions cover the private sector only. However, some states have their own OSHA-approved occupational safety and health programs. These state programs cover state and local government employees.