

WORKSAFE!
www.worksafe.org

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California workers face increased risks of injury and death - Cal/OSHA in a staffing crisis

California workers are facing a crisis in workplace safety and health. With much needed funding on the horizon, the Governor's recent proposal to invest over \$220 billion in projects for crumbling infrastructure, more workers will be facing a tough choice between a job to feed their families and coming home safely from that work. The state agency that enforces workplace health and safety is already on life support. We need more inspectors, and laws and regulations to improve approaches to safety that work in conjunction with government enforcement.

The California State Auditor Report 2005-119 (www.bsa.ca.gov/bsa) released today, found Cal/OSHA, the state agency responsible for worker health and safety, severely lacks the capacity to meet its mandate. This investigation, commissioned by Assembly Member Wilma Chan (D - Oakland), was motivated by worker safety concerns associated with the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge retrofit, the largest active public works project west of the Mississippi River.

Cal/OSHA has 169 inspectors in the field, 29 funded vacancies and another 37 authorized positions, according to the California Association of Professional Scientists (www.capsscscientists.org), an organization representing Cal/OSHA inspectors. Even if the vacancies and authorized positions were filled, Cal/OSHA would be in dire straits.

In 1980 Federal OSHA had a benchmark of 805 inspectors for a labor force of 11.6 million and about 500,000 workplaces. California's working population is now close to 18 million and there are 1.1 million workplaces. Yet the benchmark is at 198 inspectors.

"We must not wait for a disaster of the magnitude suffered by workers recently in West Virginia," notes Fran Schreiber, Executive Director of WORKSAFE! Ms. Schreiber previously worked for Cal/OSHA heading the unit that prosecuted employers for killing workers on the job. "Why wait until workers die and bring a case; we need to prevent those deaths, and we can."

California must make a commitment to safety: resources for inspectors and other staff, including occupational physicians and nurses, and a permanent commitment to staffing evidenced by renegotiating the benchmark to maintain an inspector to worker and workplace ratio such as those in Washington and Oregon. A strong government presence, one that can tackle a sufficient number of programmed inspections, respond to complaints, and follow-up on data reported by employers that may be skewed to avoid exposing what is really happening to workers on the job, can increase the likelihood of preventing deaths in the workplace.

Immigrant workers, who make up about 25% of California's workforce, are especially impacted by the lack of Cal/OSHA resources. Of the 169 Cal/OSHA inspectors currently in the field, only 25 are bilingual. This language barrier leaves the most vulnerable workers without meaningful access to already overworked inspectors.

Seventeen workers died during construction of the Bay Bridge in the late 1930's. The bridge contractor now touts its safety record, but underlying data is gathered without government oversight. The Audit highlights that deficiency. We cannot rely on being "lucky so far". Self-inspection without meaningful participation by represented workers and sufficient resources for independent government oversight will not sustain luck.

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WORKSAFE! is a coalition of labor and community groups, workers, occupational safety and health professionals, environmental health and justice advocates and others that focus on policy reform. We strive to empower California workers and unions to advocate for better workplace safety and health.