

## **Wanted: California workplace safety retirees to help confront coronavirus crisis**

By Jie Jenny Zou, Staff Writer, August 14, 2020

Washington – Days after [The Times reported](#) “crippling” vacancies at California’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health that led at least one employee to use Google Translate to decipher Spanish complaints and kept others from on-site inspections, the agency announced it will temporarily hire retired inspectors.

The agency, better known as [Cal/OSHA](#), said the decision had been in the works for weeks and was not in response to The Times’ reporting. Staff have struggled to handle an influx of workplace complaints since the pandemic hit, current and former employees told The Times.

“Please consider this opportunity to play a critical role in fighting the spread of the disease,” the Aug. 10 notice read, soliciting retired inspectors to rejoin its ranks. The agency stressed a “particular need” for bilingual speakers.

Spokesperson Erika Monterroza called the move part of a “robust recruitment and hiring plan that includes short term staffing strategies.” The agency recently mailed notices to 80 former inspectors and plans to reach out to more soon.

Inspectors are responsible for investigating workplace complaints and responding to reports of injuries, illnesses and fatalities. Monterroza said the goal is to build a “temporary workforce that could be used in a variety of ways to supplement current staffing levels.”

Garrett Brown, a former veteran inspector turned watchdog, said he had not yet received a notice to return and could not recall a similar hiring call in the 20 years he worked at Cal/OSHA. Brown has been tracking the agency’s decline since he left in 2014, including “crippling” vacancies that have kept some offices less than half-staffed.

If the effort succeeds in drawing retirees back, Brown said, it could provide existing staff with more time to conduct on-site investigations. Current and former staffers told The Times that the agency has largely abandoned in-person inspections, handling most complaints by letters and calls to employers.

However, Brown and other former staffers, remained skeptical that short-term measures would do much to solve the agency’s deep-seated issues surrounding hiring and turnover.

Cal/OSHA’s parent agency, the Department of Industrial Relations, was stripped of its hiring abilities amid several audits and a [state investigation made public in 2019](#) that uncovered nepotism and fraud. During an Aug. 6 meeting, DIR Director Katie Hagen said the department was still trying to “earn” that authority back.

One former inspector called the new hiring effort, “desperate,” but another said they would return — provided the agency put COVID-19 safeguards in place for at-risk workers.

The agency temporarily shut down its Monrovia office last month after an employee tested positive for COVID-19. Employees have continued to share emails with The Times indicating agency officials have been slow to notify staff of potential viral exposures and have only recently begun to create detailed office policies regarding face coverings and other precautions. The agency does not provide COVID-19 testing for staff.

Asked how Cal/OSHA would handle retirees whose older age could make them particularly susceptible to COVID-19, Monterroza said it would place those at risk in positions such as “trainers, consultation staff, policy writers, researchers and more.”

Those able to perform on-site inspections would be provided with personal protective equipment and training, she added.