

Crisis at Cal/OSHA: Crippling vacancies, no net hiring in six months, 18 months after Gavin Newsom became California Governor

June 26, 2020

Cal/OSHA has crippling vacancies in field inspector and leadership positions – in the midst of a continuing pandemic – and there has been no net hiring in all of 2020.

There were 52 vacant field inspector positions in June 2020, for a vacancy rate of 21%. In January 2020, there were 48 vacancies, which rose to 52 in February and has remained constant since then. Democrat Gavin Newsom became Governor in January 2019, but has allowed the state workplace safety agency to twist slowly in the wind while millions of workers are exposed to a surging coronavirus pandemic throughout the state.

Less than a third of the inspectorate are now conducting in-person field enforcement inspections, and there is a backlog of more than 2,000 worker complaints and dozens of employer-reported fatalities, injuries and illnesses. The leadership vacancies have compounded the inability of the agency to respond effectively to either the pandemic or “normal” workplace health and safety hazards.

At this point, Cal/OSHA is indistinguishable from Trump’s Fed OSHA in terms of prolonged understaffing, voluntary guidelines over regulatory enforcement, and a very limited number of in-person field inspections. This is despite the fact that California has an existing, 11-year-old regulation designed precisely to protect health care workers against airborne diseases like COVID-19, and numerous other existing regulations to protect other workers from hazards created by the virus.

The details of Cal/OHSA’s paralysis are as follows:

Inspector vacancies ---

- 52 Compliance Safety and Health Officer (CSHO) positions are vacant in the 245 CSHO positions for a vacancy rate of 21.2%
- Fremont has 7 of 11 CSHO positions vacant (64%)
- Santa Ana has 6 of 12 CSHO positions vacant (50%) and no District Manager
- San Francisco has 3 of 7 CSHO positions vacant (43%)
- Region I (San Francisco Bay Area) has an overall CSHO vacancy rate of 36%
- Six CSHO positions have disappeared altogether from the Organization Charts since July 2019

Leadership vacancies ---

- There are two vacancies in the six Regional Manager positions: Region III Manager in Santa Ana, and Region VI Manager supervising the High Hazard Unit and Labor Enforcement Task Force (LETF).

- There are six District Offices without a District Manager: San Bernardino, Sacramento, Long Beach, LETF/Santa Ana, Santa Ana and Van Nuys.
- Region III (San Diego, Santa Ana, San Bernardino) has three of four District Manager positions vacant, and the Regional Manager position is also vacant.
- The Mining & Tunneling Unit (Region V) has two of three District Offices with manager vacancies, the training unit manager position is vacant, and the Regional Manager/Principal Safety Engineer position is vacant.

Cal/OSHA has an inspector to worker ratio of one inspector to 99,000 workers – much less health protective than the ratios of Washington State (1 to 25,000) and Oregon (1 to 22,000). California even has fewer workplace health inspectors (193) than the number of California Fish & Game Wardens (250).

In a state where more than an estimated 25% of the 18.5 million workers speak languages other than English, there are only 28 Cal/OSHA field enforcement inspectors certified to speak languages besides English. With no net hiring at Cal/OSHA in 2020, there has been no improvement in the agency's language capability.

With the vacancy rate for field inspectors at or above 20% for last six months, it is not clear what the Governor is waiting for before implementing a plan to revive and rebuild Cal/OSHA at a time when workplace health and safety issues have become front-page news and a burning concern for millions of Californians.

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