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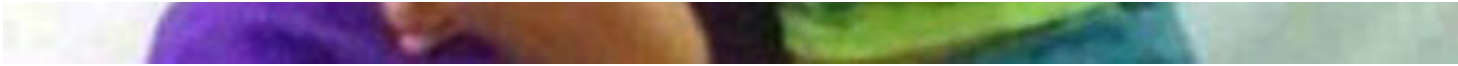
LOCAL

Family finds justice in California worker death case, which almost didn't go to court

By Joe Rubin

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Jairo Ramirez, an immigrant from El Salvador, was killed in a cement mixer at work in California. *Nilson Ramirez*

✦ **Key Takeaways**

AI-generated summary reviewed by our newsroom.

Reality Check is a [Bee series](#) holding officials and organizations accountable and shining a light on their decisions. Have a tip? Email realitycheck@sacbee.com.

In a prosecution that nearly didn't occur, the owner of a California pipe company was found criminally liable for causing the death of a worker who was crushed to death in a cement mixer and order to pay his family \$150,000 in restitution.

Jairo Ramirez was an immigrant from El Salvador who worked for the Kristich-Monterey Pipe Company in Monterey and was killed in 2021 because, a Cal-OSHA investigation determined, "the employer bypassed a safety interlock switch connected to the access door of the mixer." But the case was dropped because, the state's worker safety agency did not have enough investigators to pursue the case. His family pushed for an investigation.

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“My brother deserves justice,” said Nilson Ramirez said.

The case was resurrected when [The Bee](#) inquired about it.

“The death of Jairo Ezequiel Ramirez Ventura is a tragic reminder of the devastating consequences that can result when proper safety practices and protections are not implemented,” Monterey’s District Attorney, Jeannine M. Pacioni said in a statement. “He should be here today.”



Revelations about the case have helped lead to reform in how worker deaths are investigated in California, resulting in an increase in prosecutions of employers, according to data provided by Cal-OSHA. Since the story of his death and other stories [about the short-staffed agency](#) surfaced, the Bureau of

Investigation at Cal-OSHA [announced it would hire more investigators](#). And it has — increasing its investigators from one to 11.

THE CASE THAT ALMOST WASN'T





Jairo Ramirez, an El Salvadoran immigrant, lived near Watsonville and was crushed to death inside a cement mixer in 2021. *Nilson Ramirez*

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A March, 2023 Cal-OSHA investigation found that the employer bypassed a safety device, making flipping the potentially deadly switch easier. The report recommended manslaughter charges be filed against Kristich. But before that report could be finalized, it was dropped — not for lack of evidence, but for lack of resources.

The case had been closed for nine months. The details were never referred to a prosecutor. A Sacramento Bee investigation into the Cal-OSHA BOI — which is empowered to investigate the roughly 400 worker deaths for criminal liability and make recommendations to district attorneys — found that the unit had been reduced to a single investigator serving the entire state.

Former Cal-OSHA chief Ellen Widess, who led the agency from 2010 to 2012, told The Bee in 2024 that what happened at the BOI is “gut-wrenching and defies any logical explanation.”

Under Widess, referrals to prosecutors involving worker deaths were 10 times higher. In 2022 the BOI referred three cases. In Widess’ last year, 2012, the BOI referred 29. In 2023 the BOI referred just three. “We put bad actors in prison, that’s a real deterrent,” she said.



“To have only one inspector for 19 million workers, over a million workplaces in this state, is outrageous,” she said. “It should be a well-supported unit.”

‘WE SAW IT HAPPEN’

As The Bee previously reported, Nilson Ramirez, Jairo’s older brother, said he had given up on justice in the case of his brother’s death.

Nilson witnessed the gruesome death. “Everyone knew that the boss could turn on the machine with the door open,” he said. “We saw it happen.”

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After Jairo made the journey from El Salvador and joined his brother at the plant, the “machine scared him too,” his brother said. “My brother had a bad feeling,” he said. “But he had a 4-year-old boy back in El Salvador, Saul de Jesus, and he felt like he had no choice.”



Identification card for Jairo Ramirez, a former employee at Kristich Monterey Pipe Company in Watsonville. Ramirez died after the cement mixer he was cleaning turned on with him inside. *Courtesy of Todd Johnson*

Under the terms of a guilty plea by company owner Kristo Kristich for causing “Employee Death/Impairment,” Kristich must “provide a \$50,000.00 (U.S. dollars) trust in the name of the victim’s son, which may be collected when he turns 18 years of age.”

Kristich, 80, received an 18-month jail sentence that is suspended, provided he makes the restitution payments and installs a camera “showing the exterior mixer’s door and inside of the mixer, such that it is viewable from the interior control tower from which the operator cases cement pipes,” according to minutes from the final settlement of the case.



“We will continue to work alongside Cal-OSHA and BOI to pursue accountability and justice in cases like his,” Pacioni said.

The attorney for the company has not responded to requests to comment.

A FRANTIC SEARCH FOR FILES

Former BOI supervisor Teresa Wassman, in an interview, recalled frantic calls from top Cal-OSHA officials asking her to find files, including the shelved investigation, related to the case after learning that Pacioni intended to pursue it. The Monterey County DA filed criminal charges against Kristich hours before the statute of limitations was to expire in January 2024.



“Unfortunately, there are other Jairos out there. This was far from the only case that was closed where charges were warranted,” Wassman said. Wassman, who retired last year, said that hundreds of cases involving worker deaths and amputations were never properly investigated because the unit was understaffed.

Chris Kuhns, who worked as an investigator in the BOI for 20 years and wrote the shelved report into Ramirez’s death, was frustrated by the unit’s inability to accomplish what it was required to do by law. He wrote a letter to Katie Hagen, then the Director of the Department of Industrial Relations, which oversees Cal-OSHA, in 2023.

“It is clear that the organization does not care about the important work that BOI does in making the workplace safe for California,” he wrote. “A unit that had been staffed with nine investigators, with a need to expand at that time, is down to two remaining investigators... Don’t be surprised when you are called before the Legislature to answer some difficult questions.”

Kuhns received no response. He decided to quit, taking a higher-paying job as an investigator elsewhere.



SIGNS OF A TURNAROUND

Under California law, the BOI must submit an annual report to the Legislature by March 1, detailing the number of cases it referred, successful prosecutions and staffing levels in the previous year.

Cal-OSHA is out of compliance with that statute, having posted no [annual report](#) since 2023.

An audit released last year by the California State Auditor found that understaffing has been a key issue. . “State law requires the bureau to be staffed by as many attorneys and investigators as are necessary to carry out the purposes of the statutes, the audit stated. “However, the bureau had a total of three field investigators for the entire state from 2020 through 2022, despite processing hundreds of cases each year.”



But there are signs of a turnaround.

In 2024, Cal-OSHA created a new position — Chief Investigator — and hired Michael Bright, who previously worked as a special investigator probing fraud at the State Compensation Insurance Fund, to fill that role. Bright is a Sacramento native who attended the criminal justice program at Sacramento State. The BOI now has 12 on its staff, including him. “(The department has) supervising special Investigators, and special Investigators supporting investigations across nine district offices statewide,” Cal-OSHA spokesperson Denisse Gomez said.

The beefed-up staffing has led to additional prosecutions and investigations. The Bureau referred 27 cases for possible criminal prosecution to District Attorneys in 2025, a ninefold increase from 2023. In 2025 district attorneys filed charges in four cases referred to their offices and secured convictions in three.

In January, a budget change proposal authored by Bright was approved by Stewart Knox, the Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development, requesting 14 positions and \$2.3 million in 2026-27 and \$2 million in 2027-28. The money would reallocate existing Cal-OSHA funds “to address case backlog and statutory compliance within the Division of Occupational Safety and Health.”



That proposal still needs approval from the Legislature and the governor.

If successful, the BOI could expand 20-fold from when it had dwindled to a single investigator for the entire state — when the Jairo Ramirez case was

