

The sad decline in Cal/OSHA's worker protection

Garrett Brown – April 11, 2026

One of the most shocking revelations from the 2525 California State Audit of Cal/OSHA was how few worker complaints actually got investigated – only 17% of worker complaints in fiscal year 2023-24 – by the state worker protection agency. Overall, Cal/OSHA still conducts on-site inspections less than half the time for all types of enforcement activity. Instead of site visits, Cal/OSHA merely sends a letter to employers so that they can “self-inspect” and report their conclusions back to Cal/OSHA. These “letter investigations” now account for 60% of Cal/OSHA enforcement actions.

The current under-50% on-site inspections contrasts sharply with Cal/OSHA's activity thirty years ago when 75% of enforcement actions were actual visits to work sites by Cal/OSHA inspectors.

The net result of this drop-off of genuine enforcement actions – primarily caused by crippling inspector vacancies, chronic understaffing, and failure to utilize all available financial resources – has meant that worker protections in California are weaker than ever. As documented by a constant stream of news media reports, both old and new regulations cannot be effectively enforced, and worker populations like immigrants in agriculture, artificial stone manufacturers, and numerous other industries are especially vulnerable.

State Audit Findings

In July 2025, the California State Auditor issued its Report 2024-115 summarizing the audit of five years of Cal/OSHA enforcement activity. For the last year of the study – state fiscal year 2023-24 from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024 – the State Auditors reported the following activity by Cal/OSHA in response to worker complaints and employer reports of serious injuries and fatalities:

- 13% of worker complaints were invalidated
- 82% of validated complaints were responded to with a letter investigation
- 17% of validated complaints had an on-site inspection

- 42% of employer accident reports were responded to with an on-site inspection
- 58% of employer accident reports (including those with injuries) were responded to with a letter investigation

That means that a worker filing a complaint that year had less than one chance in five that it would result in an on-site inspection by Cal/OSHA compliance safety and health officers. Even with employer-reported serious injuries and deaths, on-site inspections occurred less than half the time.

Cal/OSHA’s ability to identify and correct hazardous conditions, and to determine the cause of injury accidents, so as to be an effective deterrent to preventable worker exposures and incidents has been severely compromised.

Letter investigations continue to dominate Cal/OSHA activity

Unfortunately, the latest available inspection data released by the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), Cal/OSHA’s parent agency, shows that on-site inspections continue to make up less than 50% of Cal/OSHA’s activity.

**Cal/OSHA Response to All Types of Enforcement Activity;
Including worker complaints, employer accident reports, programmed inspections,
referrals, and follow-up inspections**

Time Period	Total Activity: Complaints, accidents, programmed, referrals, follow-up	On-Site Inspections	Letter Investigations
CY 2023	15,513	6,820 / 43.9%	8,693 / 56.1%
CY 2024	15,780	6,367 / 40.3%	9,413 / 59.7%
Q1 2025	3,403	1,333 / 39.2%	2,070 / 60.8%
Q2 2025	4,504	1,875 / 41.6%	2,629 / 58.4%
Q3 2025	5,130	2,267 / 44.2%	2,863 / 55.8%
Three Qs 2025	13,110	5,542 / 42.3%	7,568 / 57.7%

Data from the Federal OSHA OIS System of DOSH activity entered into the Federal database by Cal/OSHA District Offices, generated on October 28, 2025.

The sad news is that the lack of worker protection, and the lack of an effective deterrent for irresponsible employers, continues unabated two years after the end of the audit period.

A decline from the historical record

The current 40-45% level of on-site inspections by Cal/OSHA contrasts sharply with the practice of the worker protection agency over the last 30 years, as reflected by information from the same data base.

Time Period	Total Activity: Complaints, accidents, programmed, referrals, follow-up	On-Site Inspections	Letter Investigations
CY 2015	13,985	7,754 / 55%	6,231 / 45%
CY 2010	12,316	8,463 / 69%	3,853 / 31%
CY 2005	12,593	8,176 / 65%	4,417 / 35%
CY 2000	13,002	9,298 / 72%	3,704 / 28%
CY 1995	13,358	10,076 / 75%	3,282 / 25%

Data from the Federal OSHA OIS System of DOSH activity entered into the Federal database by Cal/OSHA District Offices, generated on July 13, 2022.

Cal/OSHA’s total activity was lower in the previous decades, but so were the number of field inspector positions.

Citations for violations of state law drop sharply

Cal/OSHA data for the first nine months of 2025 – the latest stats available – shows that the number of on-site inspections increased 5% over the previous year, but the number of citations for unsafe conditions and violations of state law plummeted in 2025.

Comparing the first three quarters of 2025 to the same period in 2024:

- Agriculture citations were down 14%;
- Construction citations were down 25%
- Waste management citations were down 28%
- Manufacturing citations were down 37%
- Transportation and warehousing citations were down 50%
- Health care and social assistance citations were down 53%

The decline in citations issued means a commensurate drop in civil penalties assessed, undermining the deterrent impact of Cal/OSHA’s enforcement efforts.

Chronic CSHO vacancies have generated tremendous pressure on District Managers and CSHOs themselves to “open and close, open and close, open and close” as many perfunctory inspections as possible to keep up with the steady incoming flow of worker complaints and employer accident reports.

According to the latest available performance data, Cal/OSHA responds to worker complaints with actual, on-site inspections less than 45% of the time; and even when inspections are conducted, the number of citations issued to correct unsafe and unhealthy conditions have dropped dramatically.

Enforcement budget cut undermines efforts to improve

Cal/OSHA’s Enforcement budget for the current fiscal year 2025-26 was slashed by \$16 million – adding under-funding to under-staffing for the beleaguered worker safety agency. Governor Gavin Newsom – taking a page from President Trump’s playbook – proposed a \$21 million cut for worker protection enforcement, and the Democratic Legislature approved a \$16 million reduction. Cal/OSHA is financed by a completely independent fund which receives no state revenues, and which has run \$200 million surpluses in the last three fiscal years. There is no fiscal reason requiring this budget cutback.

California’s worker H&S protections dramatically lower than neighboring states

The standard measure of worker health and safety protection agencies internationally is the ratio of inspectors to workers. The International Labor Organization (ILO) recommends a ratio of 1 inspector to 15,000 workers for advanced industrial countries.

The state of Washington has a ratio of 1 inspector to 28,000 workers, while the state of Oregon has a ratio of 1 inspector to 23,000 workers. This state data comes from the April 2025 “Death on the Job” report issued by the AFL-CIO. The hand count of Cal/OSHA positions on the latest available DOSH Organization Chart documents a ratio in California of 1 inspector to 99,000 workers.

Don’t the workers of California deserve the same level of protection that workers in Oregon and Washington state enjoy?

Workload study calls for 50 more field inspectors

Six years ago, DIR contracted with the CPS HR Consulting firm to conduct a study of Cal/OSHA inspectors’ workload and to recommend a staffing level to meet that load. In their July 2020 report, the consulting company concluded that 328 inspectors were needed to effectively perform the agency’s work. In January 2026, Cal/OSHA has 288 CSHO positions.

Given Governor Newsom's current cut to Cal/OSHA's enforcement budget – and proposed 2026-27 cuts despite a \$200 million surplus in the agency's primary revenue fund – make adding the recommended 40 field inspectors impossible.

Regulations without actual enforcement are meaningless

California has the reputation of having the most protective workplace health and safety regulations in the nation. On paper, that is certainly true compared to Federal OSHA and many states with their own OSHA programs.

But if the agency required to effectively enforce these regulations, respond to worker complaints, and investigate employer reports of injuries and deaths cannot meet either its legal mandates or its mission, then California's bragging rights are meaningless and are but a cruel joke for sick and injured workers.

It is entirely the employers' responsibility to have a safe and healthy workplaces that will not poison, kill or maim their employees. But in the real world, effective government enforcement agencies are essential to hold irresponsible employers accountable, to be an effective deterrent to employers considering risking their workers' health and safety, and to motivate all employers to meet their legal and moral responsibilities.

Sadly, today Cal/OSHA is not such an agency.