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Chief of California's OSHA program steps down as agency vacancy rate reaches historic levels

BY MAYA MILLER

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Jeff Killip, the current chief of the Division of Occupational Safety and Health, will step down from his position with the Department of Industrial Relations in late January. His resignation comes as the division he leads, which is also known as Cal-OSHA, faces a historic staffing shortage.

MAYA MILLER *The Sacramento Bee*



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A top division chief with the California Department of Industrial Relations will step down from his role next month after only two years in the position.

Jeff Killip, the chief of the Division of Occupational Health and Safety (also known as Cal OSHA), announced his resignation Wednesday night in an email to all Cal OSHA staff. His final day will be Jan. 19. Killip will return to Olympia, Washington, to take on the role of Executive Director of the Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission.

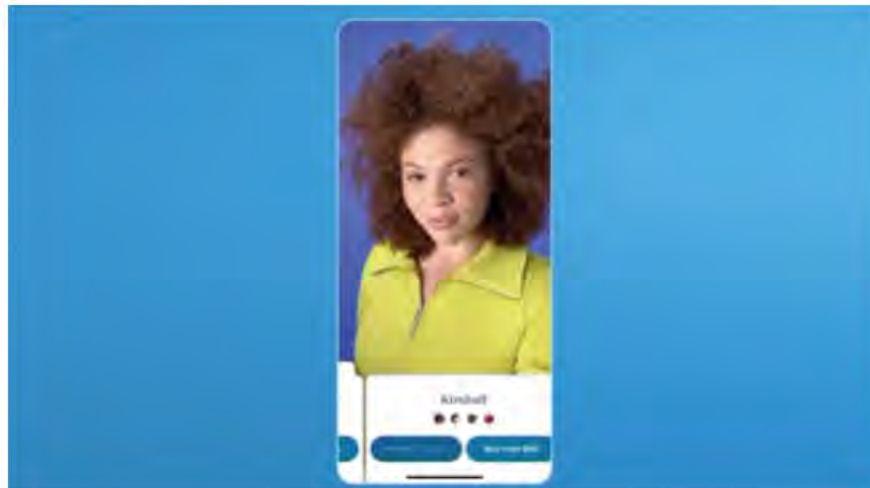
He told staff that after Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed him chief in January 2022, the move from Washington to the Bay Area has been “harder on our family life than we anticipated.”

“Despite adjustments and trouble shooting possibilities, I could not sufficiently improve our situation,” he wrote in the email obtained by The Bee. “I have strong mixed feelings about the decision despite its clarity.”

The resignation comes at what some have characterized as a tumultuous time for Cal OSHA. Among the more pressing issues that Killip inherited and has yet to resolve is a chronic staffing problem.

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The entire department lost its hiring authority in 2018 after an audit revealed former DIR director Christine Baker engaged in unfair hiring practices. The department earned back its ability to hire in 2021. But ever since, the human resources team has been hyper vigilant about ensuring every hire is merit based a practice that current Director Katie Hagen admittedly told The Bee earlier this year might have “over corrected” the situation and led to sluggish hiring.

Hiring and retention became a central mission of Killip’s during his time as division chief. He encouraged hiring managers to block out one day a week to focus on hiring. He would send a progress report on hiring every week as part of his regular email blasts to Cal OSHA staff. The report also included updates on his recent travels and photos of his dog (which some employees have described as “tone deaf” amid a staffing crises).

Despite his verbal commitment to hiring, the numbers don’t show incredible progress.

Killip presented data at a November Cal OSHA advisory committee meeting that showed a nearly 35% vacancy rate among site safety inspector classifications. The data also showed the attrition rate for those jobs outnumbered external hires for a net loss of 36 people.

“I wish it would go faster, but we’re making progress, and we’re definitely encouraged by that,” Killip said at the November meeting in his remarks about hiring progress. He pointed out that the division has made a number of hires in the legal and consultation departments, as well as the Cal OSHA administrative team.

“We’re flying the plane while we’re building it so we can get more people on board more quickly.”

The resignation comes amid an ongoing Sacramento Bee investigation into the consequences that Cal OSHA’s high vacancy rate poses for workplace safety, the ability to hold employers accountable for serious injuries and deaths, and overall morale within the department.

Garrett Brown said the timing of Killip's resignation was too perfect to not have some connection to the staffing issues and persistently high vacancy rate. Brown, a former special assistant to past Cal OSHA Chief Ellen Widess, has been an outspoken advocate for staffing up Cal OSHA ever since he first retired from the division in 2014 (he returned as a retired annuitant in 2020 to assist with the pandemic workload).

"I think there's been growing pressure on the agency to do a better job at hiring and reducing the vacancy rates.," Brown said. "And whatever efforts he's made in that regard, which I believe are genuine, have not succeeded.

"It wouldn't surprise me that in seeing the writing on the wall that this has become a political issue no doubt of concern to the governor's office and certainly to the director of the Department of Industrial Relations. He might've sought an off ramp back to Washington rather than be a sacrificial lamb for the inability of Cal OSHA and DIR to hire."

Killip on Wednesday declined to comment further beyond the remarks in his email.

"I am immensely grateful for my privileged time here with Cal/OSHA and super proud of the great work we have done together," he wrote in the all staff email. "Cal/OSHA and California are amazing."

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