



News

Politics

Education

Housing

Immigration



THE CALIFORNIA REPORT

'Minimal to Non-Existent': Safety Inspector Shortage Worsened in Pandemic, Leaving California Workers Vulnerable



LISTEN 3 min

By [Farida Jhabvala Romero](#)

Jun 2

Save Article



A demonstrator joins fast-food workers and their supporters on Feb. 9, 2021 in Los Angeles to protest unsafe working conditions

and campaigns of intimidation against workers who call out their employers due to job safety concerns during the coronavirus pandemic. (FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP via Getty Images)

Last summer, Imelda Arroyo and a co-worker at an Oakland fast food restaurant filed a complaint with the California agency in charge of enforcing health and safety regulations in the workplace. Colleagues had been diagnosed with COVID-19 but their boss hadn't notified the staff, and had failed to ensure all employees and customers wore face masks, Arroyo said.

"I felt like they were putting us and customers at too great of a risk," she said in Spanish. "I was afraid. I knew that at any moment I could get sick at work, and get my family sick."

The mother of three worried about bringing the coronavirus home to her kids and a diabetic sister with a higher risk of severe illness. She wanted state inspectors to come investigate quickly and make her workplace safer.

But in the months that followed, her employers at the restaurant still failed to follow state **rules** to prevent exposure to the virus, and more co-workers got infected, she said.

"I was asking for protection,"
said Arroyo, who submitted

'I was asking for

her complaint to Cal/OSHA in June 2020 after trying unsuccessfully to get her manager to address the concerns. “But they didn’t listen to me, and they took too long.”

protection. But they didn’t listen to me, and they took too long.’

—Imelda Arroyo, Oakland fast food worker

When Arroyo finally heard back from Cal/OSHA nine months later, on Feb. 22, 2021, officials said their inspection had found no violations at the restaurant. Yet no Cal/OSHA inspector had ever interviewed her, she said.

For years, Cal/OSHA, formally known as the Division of Occupational Safety and Health, has been understaffed. But vacancies in the ranks of field inspectors, who conduct investigations, only worsened during the pandemic, crippling the agency’s ability to protect millions of workers who faced new risks from COVID-19.

Now, as the head of Cal/OSHA and the state’s labor secretary are in line for top positions in the Biden administration, the lack of enforcement in California is facing new scrutiny.

“Enforcement of health and safety regulations has been minimal to non-existent due to the lack of occupational

health inspectors,” said a February 2021 **report** by staffers of a California Senate committee. “As a result, workers in California continue to be exposed to COVID-related and other health hazards, and sustain serious illnesses and injuries, including death.”

Sponsored

The federal government has also identified deficiencies. The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration has long criticized low staffing levels at Cal/OSHA which have resulted in delays in issuing citations for violations, according to the same report by the California Senate Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review.

As COVID-19 cases – and deaths – spiked across the state last fall and winter, Cal/OSHA received thousands of worker complaints related to the virus. Yet the vacancy rate for field inspectors doubled to 26% as of late February, compared to 13% two years earlier.

In recent months, the agency **_____**
has hired some new inspectors, **'It's a very sad**

but others have left, and 52 positions – 22% of the total – remained vacant statewide as of April 30, according to officials with the Department of Industrial Relations, which oversees Cal/OSHA.

situation. It has never been this bad.'

—Garrett Brown, former Cal/OSHA field inspector

“It’s a very sad situation. It has never been this bad,” said Garrett Brown, a former field inspector who worked for more than two decades at Cal/OSHA, and who has been **tracking** low staffing levels at the agency since the 1990s. “And it has just a tremendously adverse, harmful impact on the health, safety and rights of workers in California.”

Since the pandemic began, Cal/OSHA has received 13,000 complaints related to COVID-19, out of about 18,500 complaints overall. The agency conducted on-site, workplace inspections in 18% of the coronavirus cases, while responding to the rest with letters requiring employers to address safety and health concerns. As of May 20, the agency had issued **citations** for 550 violations, assessing \$5.1 million in proposed penalties.

A spokeswoman with the Department of Industrial Relations said both agencies “have been working hard” to find qualified

candidates for field inspector positions.

“Over the past several months, we have conducted a nationwide recruitment campaign in order to fill industrial hygienist and safety engineer positions,” said DIR spokeswoman Erika Monterroza, in a statement. “Cal/OSHA's goal is to fill all enforcement positions as quickly as possible.”

But for most of the last two years the hiring process has been slower than normal, in part because DIR lost its authority to make hires directly due to a nepotism **scandal** involving former director Christine Baker, who retired in 2018. From April 2019 to March 2021, DIR required pre-approval from the California Human Resources Department to hire staffers, said Monterroza.

Brown, the former Cal/OSHA inspector, said the dysfunction in hiring dates back many years. He faulted the current agency director, Doug Parker, and especially the state’s Labor Secretary Julie Su, who previously served as state **labor commissioner**, for not doing more to solve it. Both officials could soon leave their

RELATED COVERAGE

**Contra Costa
Officials Call for
Improved Safety
Oversight in
Wake of 2019
Fuel Tank Blast**

**California Fines
Kaiser \$499K for
COVID-19 Worker
Safety Violations**

positions, Parker to head federal OSHA and Su to become deputy Secretary at the U.S. Department of Labor.

“It’s very disappointing, is all I can say,” said Brown. “Julie Su had quite a successful record of protecting worker rights as labor commissioner, but as labor secretary, she presided over the hollowing out of Cal/OSHA.”

Through her special assistant, Colton Stadtmiller, Su declined to comment.

But Assemblyman Ash Kalra (D-San Jose), who heads the State Assembly’s Committee on Labor and Employment, was less critical of Su and Parker.

“I don’t think this falls necessarily with one individual including the department heads, I think this is something that has been long standing,” said Kalra.

Kalra said the pandemic has made hiring a challenge for all sorts of employers, and it’s difficult to recruit qualified personnel to inspector positions. But he is hopeful that Cal/OSHA can begin to do a better job of enforcing safety and health regulations, because worker protection is getting fresh

‘These Numbers Seem Suspect’: Officials Didn’t Trust Foster Farms’ COVID-19 Data During Plant Outbreak, Emails Show

attention from the governor.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has **proposed** to increase funding for the agency to create 70 new positions, including 33 inspectors, with potentially more in coming years.

“That’s a great sign,” said Kalra. “If that’s the governor’s intention...I think it gives us momentum to fill these positions.”

As Cal/OSHA staffs up, he said, it should hire inspectors who speak different languages, because many of the state’s nearly 6 million frontline workers are immigrants.

KQED

**Stay in touch. Sign
up for our daily
newsletter.**

Enter your email

Sign Up