

Cal/OSHA Staffing Crisis Deepens as 2024 Enter Second Quarter

Garrett Brown – April 9, 2024

On February 1, 2024, Cal/OSHA's vacancy rate for field compliance inspectors reached 38.8% with 108 vacancies. If the 11 compliance safety and health officer (CSHO) positions being held in reserve are included in the tally, then Cal/OSHA's inspector vacancies reach 41% with 119 CSHO vacancies.

The debilitating gaps in workplace health and safety coverage are clearest at the local level. Nine enforcement District Offices have CSHO vacancy rates at or above 40% -- San Bernardino (69%), San Francisco (66%), Santa Ana (64%), Fremont (64%), American Canyon (54%), Bakersfield (50%), Fresno (42%), Long Beach and Foster (both 40%).

Another four District Offices have CSHO vacancy rates between 33% and 40% -- Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, and Van Nuys. This means that more than a dozen Cal/OSHA District Offices have crippling vacancies that severely undermine safety protections for California's 19 million workers.

The California Employment Development Department (EDD) reported the California civilian labor force in January 2024 as 19,355,800 workers. The 163 filled CSHO positions represents an inspector to worker ratio of 1 inspector to 118,747 workers. Cal/OSHA's inspector to worker ratio of 1 inspector to 118,000 workers is much less health protective than Washington State's ratio of 1 to 27,000, and Oregon's ratio of 1 to 26,000.

There are also key manager vacancies with no Region III Manager (Los Angeles-Orange County), no chief for the Process Safety Management (PSM) unit overseeing the state's 15 operating oil refineries, and no District Managers for the Fresno, San Diego and Concord PSM offices. Three District Offices have zero clerical staff – Los Angeles, San Diego and Concord PSM – which means CSHOs must spend time doing administrative work.

According to the Cal/OSHA's "Organization Chart," there are only 16 CSHOs classified as "bilingual," and Region II (Central Valley) has no bilingual field inspectors.

Cal/OSHA has only six (6) industrial hygienists among field inspectors – with none in Region I (San Francisco), Region IV (Los Angeles), and the PSM unit. Industrial hygienists are needed to conduct "health" inspections to evaluate harmful exposures to hazardous chemicals, noise and heat, ergonomics and repetitive motions. Cal/OSHA has brand new standards to protect workers against airborne silica and lead, as well as heat exposures in a changing climate – but now has only extremely limited capacity to conduct effective industrial hygiene inspections.

There are only 10 positions for PSM refinery inspectors for the state's 15 refineries, and four of those positions are vacant.

At the same time, Cal/OSHA's "Bureau of Investigation" (BOI) which investigates and refers to county District Attorneys cases that trigger possible criminal charges has only one investigator for the entire state – and five vacancies. The once-feared BOI unit has lost virtually all of its deterrent impact with near-zero referrals for fatal accidents and multiple injury events.

Cal/OSHA's Consultation Service – which provides free service to employers, especially small employers unfamiliar with workplace health and safety – also has a 41% vacancy rate (17 out of 41 positions) for field personnel. As new regulations go into effect, such as the lead and silica standards, the Consultation Service will be able to assist far fewer employers.

In recent months there has been damning publicity about the years-long staffing crisis and its impact on workers in California in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Sacramento Bee*, journalism websites CalMatters and Capital & Main, and public radio stations like KQED in San Francisco. Nonetheless, California's Governor, Labor Secretary, and Director of the Department of Industrial Relations have failed to end the field inspector vacancy crisis and protect California workers from irresponsible employers.