

Newsom's Defense of Californians Should Include Cal/OSHA

by [Garrett Brown](#) on December 9, 2024



Last Monday, Governor Gavin Newsom convened a special session of the California state legislature to “defend Californians” against the incoming Trump administration. Lots of brave words were declared and bold promises were made for a \$25 million “defense fund” to be considered by the Legislature in January.

If Newsom really wants to set a good example for the rest of the nation, he might start by ending the understaffing that has crippled California’s enforcement of its own job safety and health rules covering 19 million workers in the private and public sector.

Newsom has well-known national political ambitions, and he is positioning himself to be a leader of Democratic Party opposition to an expected Republican roll-back of federal regulations protecting workers, consumers, and the environment.

However, since he became governor in 2019, California’s workplace safety agency – Cal/OSHA –

has suffered from growing understaffing, just as federal OSHA lacked sufficient inspectors during Trump's first term.

Cal/OSHA Field Compliance Inspector Vacancies —

Compliance Safety and Health Officers (CSHO)

During the Newsom Administration (2019-2024)

Year / Month	Number of CSHO Vacancies	CSHO Vacancy Rate
Year 2024		
August	124	46%
June	101	40%
March	109	39%
January	108	38.8%
Year 2023		
November	97	35.5%
July	95	35%
Year 2022		
December	75	29%
August	70	27%
April	63	24%
Year 2021		
December	77	27.2%
May	65	25.7%
February	59	23.9%
Year 2020		
December	57	23%
July	53	21.5%
February	52	21%
Year 2019		
November	46	18.5%
August	37	14.8%
February	30	12.5%

Source: All data from the official “DIR List of Authorized DOSH Positions” and the “DOSH Organization Chart” from 2019 to 2024 generated every month by the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) and Cal/OSHA (DOSH).

In August 2024, according to the latest available official data, Cal/OSHA had a vacancy rate of 46% in field enforcement inspector positions. Fifteen of 30 Cal/OSHA enforcement offices had inspector vacancy rates above 40% — ranging from 42% to 73%. The state has only one inspector for every 130,000 workers, as compared to the Washington state ratio of 1 inspector to 26,000 workers or Oregon’s ratio of 1 inspector to 24,000 workers.

Worker Protections Eroded

The years-long understaffing has had a devastating impact on worker protections in California:

- Starting in 2020, the majority of worker complaints about unsafe or unhealthy conditions resulted in Cal/OSHA merely sending a letter to the employer involved, rather than making an actual work site inspection.
- To manage an ever-growing backlog of the actual on-site inspections, Cal/OSHA compliance officers often rush through abbreviated, “once over lightly” jobsite visits, without having enough time to meet with all affected workers, perform a thorough walk-through, conduct exposure monitoring and assessments, and carefully review employer records of job injuries and accidents.

Not surprisingly, the Cal/OSHA inspectorate riddled with vacancies opened 12% fewer inspections during the first three quarters of 2024 than in the same period in 2023. Nine of the top 10 industrial sectors saw fewer inspections than in the same period of 2023. Cal/OSHA also issued 12% fewer citations to employers in the first three quarters of 2024 compared to 2023, and the 2024 citation total is 50% lower than during the same period in 2022.

Stung by critical media coverage of Cal/OSHA’s understaffing and resulting failure to protect workers, particularly those engaged in agriculture, the agency recently announced a reorganization. Cal/OSHA will now have three new district offices in Santa Barbara, Riverside and Fresno, and four new offices for a new agricultural safety unit in Bakersfield, El Centro, Lodi and Salinas.

But empty new offices, or ones half-staffed with inspector transferred in from elsewhere in the state, will not change the situation on the ground without more trained and bilingual field inspectors. Currently Cal/OSHA has only 11 field inspectors statewide certified to be fluent in languages other than English.

Cal/OSHA Twisting Slowly, Slowly in the Wind

The Governor prides himself on being a “problem-solver” and “can do” policy maker. Yet, even though the legislature has fully funded the budget needed to hire and create a better staffed inspectorate, the Newsom administration has been unable or unwilling to fill Cal/OSHA inspector vacancies.

Clearly, having a fully-staffed, trained, and robust force of Cal/OSHA inspectors is not going to win the Governor any applause from his many past – and possible future – corporate campaign donors in agriculture and industry.

But if Governor Newsom wants to be a real leader in the Trump 2.0 era – he can cut through the red tape and months-long waits in the hiring process to fully staff Cal/OSHA. He can order a revision of the overly restrictive job qualifications, and demand an accelerated pace of job offers.

Currently, many qualified applicants with industrial hygiene and occupational health and safety college degrees end up taking job offers elsewhere while they wait, fruitlessly, to hear back from Cal/OSHA. Candidates without engineering degrees, but who have years of relevant experience in union or company health and safety committees, are not even eligible to apply.

A weakened, in-name-only workplace safety agency cannot meet its mission and mandate to protect workers against jobsite hazards that result in hundreds of injuries, illnesses and fatalities each year in California. Nor will it be a deterrent to irresponsible employers who will seek to take full advantage of the incoming Trump administration’s pledge to slash regulatory health and safety protections.

California’s working people and their families should not be forced to pay the price in blood and tears for the Governor Newsom’s Trump-like lack of concern about serious workplace health and safety threats.

Garrett Brown worked for Cal/OSHA for more than 20 years as a field compliance officer and later as Special Assistant to the Chief of Cal/OSHA in Headquarters. He currently teaches occupational health and safety courses at UC Berkeley’s School of Public Health.