



BRIEFLY...

COVID-19: TO PROTECT MISSION CRITICAL WORKERS, OSHA COULD LEVERAGE INSPECTION COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES WITH EXTERNAL FEDERAL AGENCIES

March 31, 2022

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

While playing a critical role in the mission to ensure safe and healthful work environments, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) corps of Compliance Safety and Health Officers (CSHO) declined over the last decade as the number of businesses increased. The COVID-19 pandemic further tested CSHO inspection and oversight capabilities when industries with high risk of exposure continued operating with employees on site. Given the resource constraint with CSHOs, this was an opportunity for OSHA to realize collaborative potential with other federal agencies' enforcement and oversight personnel to help protect workers from the contagion and prevent them from becoming casualties of the virus.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted this performance audit to answer the following question:

To what extent did OSHA collaborate with external federal agencies' enforcement or oversight personnel to help safeguard U.S. workers during the pandemic?

We interviewed OSHA and other agency officials, analyzed OSHA's referral data, and reviewed information about high-risk industries, memoranda related to interagency collaboration, and public laws and regulations.

WHAT OIG FOUND

OSHA had not collaborated with external federal agencies' enforcement or oversight personnel to help safeguard mission critical U.S. workers during the pandemic.

From the onset of the pandemic, OSHA received a sudden influx of complaints. However, in order to reduce person-to-person contact for its own personnel, the agency decreased the number of its inspections, particularly onsite inspections. Despite receiving 15 percent more complaints in 2020 than in 2019, OSHA conducted 50 percent fewer inspections. This meant leaving employees vulnerable to COVID-19 as a workplace hazard.

With an already historically low number of CSHOs and a growing number of worksites to inspect, enhanced collaboration between OSHA and external federal agencies with enforcement personnel on site in high-risk COVID-19 industries could have better protected workers.

Instead, OSHA neither tracked nor analyzed inspection-related referrals made by external federal agencies to determine if those agencies were regularly referring potential hazards; and if not, OSHA did not gauge their related outreach and training needs. It also did not have up-to-date agreements with federal counterparts conducting enforcement or oversight activities during the pandemic that would have enabled OSHA to capitalize on collaborative efforts. By not identifying federal partners in a position to assist during a large-scale safety and health crisis and not having or creating collaborative agreements with those partners, OSHA lost a valuable opportunity to better protect U.S. workers.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

We made two recommendations to OSHA to establish interagency collaboration by devising a plan containing training and outreach, and using memoranda of understanding or other written agreements.

READ THE FULL REPORT

<http://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2022/19-22-003-10-105.pdf>