



BRIEFLY...

COVID-19: OSHA'S ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES DID NOT SUFFICIENTLY PROTECT WORKERS FROM PANDEMIC HEALTH HAZARDS

October 31, 2022

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is responsible for ensuring safe and healthful working conditions for 130 million workers employed at more than 8 million worksites. It does so by setting and enforcing standards and by providing training, outreach, education, and assistance to employers and employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented OSHA with significant worksite enforcement and inspection challenges in its operations and efforts to safeguard workers. Previous OIG work identified a significant reduction in OSHA inspections during the pandemic while complaints significantly increased. Worksite inspections are an important part of OSHA's enforcement function and are integral to reducing worker injuries, illnesses, and fatalities.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted this audit to answer the following question:

Did OSHA's enforcement activities help protect U.S. workers from COVID-19 health hazards?

To answer this question, we interviewed OSHA national and area office officials and reviewed OSHA guidance, public laws, and states' standards related to COVID-19.

We also analyzed OSHA's COVID-19 complaint and enforcement data and reviewed sampled inspections. In addition, we evaluated survey results from OSHA inspectors' experiences conducting inspections during the pandemic.

WHAT OIG FOUND

We found OSHA's enforcement activities did not sufficiently protect workers from COVID-19 health hazards because OSHA: (1) did not issue citations to enforce the standard for recording and reporting occupational injuries and illnesses in 15 percent of sampled fatality inspections, (2) lacks complete information on COVID-19 infection rates at worksites, and (3) closed inspections without ensuring it received and reviewed all items requested from employers to demonstrate alleged COVID-19 health hazards had been mitigated.

These issues occurred because OSHA had not established controls to ensure citations were issued or to document the rationale, does not require employers to report all COVID-19 cases among workers, and does not have a tool to ensure it receives and reviews all requested documentation prior to closing inspections. As a result, there is a heightened risk that workers suffered unnecessary exposure to the virus.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

We made five recommendations to OSHA regarding improving its enforcement actions, standards, guidance, and training to better protect workers from exposure to COVID-19 and for future pandemics. OSHA agreed with three of the five recommendations and will take one other recommendation into account in its rulemaking.

READ THE FULL REPORT

<https://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2023/19-23-001-10-105.pdf>