



BRIEFLY...

COVID-19: INCREASED WORKSITE COMPLAINTS AND REDUCED OSHA INSPECTIONS LEAVE U.S. WORKERS' SAFETY AT INCREASED RISK

February 25, 2021

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised specific concerns about the health and safety of workers and the measures OSHA has taken to ensure employers are mitigating employees' risk of exposure to the virus at workplaces.

Due to the pandemic, OSHA has received a surge of complaints in a matter of months, while garnering the attention of Congress, labor unions, and media with requests to act swiftly on behalf of the 130 million workers at more than 8 million worksites nationwide whom OSHA is responsible for protecting.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted this audit to answer the following question:

What plans and guidance has OSHA developed to address challenges created by COVID-19, and to what extent have these challenges affected OSHA's ability to protect the safety of workers and its workforce?

To answer this question, we reviewed guidance, public laws, and state standards; conducted interviews; and researched complaint and enforcement data.

READ THE FULL REPORT

<http://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2021/19-21-003-10-105.pdf>

WHAT OIG FOUND

OSHA has taken a series of actions to address its challenges and has issued guidance in response to the pandemic. However, increased complaints, reduced inspections, and most inspections not being conducted onsite subject employees to greater safety risk.

Since the start of the pandemic, OSHA has received a sudden influx of complaints, and as a means of reducing person-to-person contact, has reduced the number of its inspections, particularly onsite inspections. Compared to a similar period in 2019, OSHA received 15 percent more complaints in 2020, but performed 50 percent fewer inspections. As a result, there is an increased risk that OSHA is not providing the level of protection that workers need at various job sites. During the pandemic, OSHA issued 295 violations for 176 COVID-19 related inspections, while 1,679 violations for 756 COVID-19 related inspections were issued under State Plans.

With most OSHA inspections done remotely during the pandemic, workplace hazards may go unidentified and unabated longer, leaving employees vulnerable. OSHA's onsite presence during inspections has historically resulted in timely mitigation efforts for at least a portion of the hazards identified. Specifically, a 2017 OIG report noted that for approximately one third of OSHA-issued citations reviewed, employers abated the hazard during the inspection or within 24 hours of OSHA identifying the hazard.

While OSHA has issued several guidance documents to enhance safety provisions during the pandemic, guidance is not enforceable like rules or standards would be, and OSHA has not issued an emergency temporary standard during the pandemic for airborne infectious diseases that may better protect employees' health and safety at worksites.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

We made recommendations to OSHA regarding onsite inspection strategies, remote inspection guidance, and an emergency temporary standard for infectious diseases. OSHA agreed with all our recommendations.