

GAO

Testimony

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Occupational Safety and Health:  
Worksite Programs and Committees

Statement of  
Franklin Frazier, Director of  
Education and Employment Issues  
Human Resources Division

Before the  
Subcommittee on Labor  
Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
U. S. Senate



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**Summary of GAO Testimony by Franklin Frazier  
on Safety and Health Programs and Committees**

In an August 1990 report, Occupational Safety and Health: Options for Improving Safety and Health in the Workplace (GAO/HRD-90-66BR), GAO identified the importance of involvement of employers and workers in improving workplace safety and health. It suggested worksite safety and health programs and committees as ways to achieve this. In follow-on work, GAO further examined the feasibility of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) requiring employers to have safety and health programs. That study identified six state-operated safety and health programs that require some or all employers to implement safety and health programs; three of them also require employers to involve employees in safety and health committees. Preliminary information from those states and other sources indicates that safety and health programs (1) have a positive impact, (2) extend enforcement agencies' limited resources, and (3) can be implemented successfully by employers.

**Worksite Safety and Health Programs** Effective safety and health programs require the commitment of management to allocate resources for (1) worksite hazard analyses, (2) development of hazard prevention and control plans, (3) safety and health training, and (4) employee involvement. Although GAO cannot quantify the overall impact of these programs on injury and illness rates, GAO identified substantial evidence of their benefits. For example, worksites participating in OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program (where implementation of worksite programs is a requirement) have achieved injury rates at least 40 percent less than the average in their industries. Six states have mandated safety and health programs because they are convinced of their value. In addition, in its lock-out/tag-out and hazard communication standards, OSHA has mandated these programs to address specific hazards.

**Enhancing Enforcement Efforts** Requiring worksite safety and health programs, in which employers inspect their own workplaces and correct hazards they find, provides one way to extend enforcement resources. OSHA and the state programs cannot, through inspections alone, ensure safety and health in the workplace because they have responsibility for over 88 million workers in about 6 million workplaces and fewer than 3,000 inspectors. Further, the experience in Washington and Oregon suggests that when employers have identified hazards and a program to abate them, inspection efforts can be more efficient.

**Implementing Safety and Health Programs** Although several potential barriers to the implementation of worksite safety and health programs exist, states requiring such programs have found ways of addressing these problems. For example, all six states provide free training and consultation services to small employers to help them design and implement their safety and health programs.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to provide, for the record, some observations about the value of worksite safety and health programs and committees in improving the safety and health of workers in the United States. In our August 1990 report, Occupational Safety and Health: Options for Improving Safety and Health in the Workplace (GAO/HRD-90-66BR), we noted the importance of involvement of employers and workers in improving workplace safety and health. We described (1) the implementation of worksite safety and health programs and (2) labor-management safety and health committees as options for gaining more active participation of both employers and employees in safety and health.

After we issued our report, Senator Claiborne Pell requested that we further examine the feasibility of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) mandating safety and health programs for employers. To answer the requestor's questions, we

- examined the implementation experience in all six states that require employers to have these programs, using interviews with state officials and employers and examination of program documents and inspection results;
- collected information about the programs of employers that have voluntarily implemented them;
- reviewed the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's voluntary guidelines for safety and health programs; and
- reviewed public comments on proposed state legislation mandating these worksite programs and on OSHA's guidelines encouraging employers to implement these programs voluntarily.

Our preliminary results indicate that safety and health programs (1) have a positive impact on work-related injuries and illnesses, (2) represent a useful way to extend enforcement agencies' limited resources, and (3) appear to have been successfully implemented by a variety of industries required to do so by state legislation.

#### BACKGROUND

The Occupational Safety and Health Act requires that employers provide a worksite free of recognized safety and health hazards. To help employers meet this statutory responsibility, OSHA issued guidance on worksite safety and health programs for employers' voluntary use. These guidelines, issued in 1989, describe a comprehensive safety and health program, in which employers inspect their own workplaces and correct hazards they find, as an effective way of reducing accidents and injuries at the worksite.

OSHA describes such safety and health programs as requiring the commitment of management to allocate resources for (1) worksite hazard analysis, (2) development of hazard prevention and control plans, (3) safety and health training for employees, and (4) employee involvement in development and implementation of these programs. OSHA has described employee involvement as an important component of safety and health programs, whether employees are involved formally through safety and health committees or through less formal mechanisms.

In our current work, we have identified six states that require some or all employers to implement worksite safety and health programs; three of them require employers to implement safety and health committees. Each state underscores the importance of management commitment to the success of these programs.

### Impact of Worksite Safety and Health Programs

Although we cannot quantify the overall impact of safety and health programs on work-related injuries and illnesses, we have identified several kinds of evidence about their value. For example,

- The 71 worksites that have chosen to participate in OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program (which requires comprehensive safety and health programs) all have injury rates that are at least 40 percent less than the average in their industries. In its guidelines advocating that employers voluntarily establish safety and health programs, OSHA referred to the Voluntary Protection Program experience along with the results of other studies when it asserted that these programs have a positive effect on preventing injuries and illnesses.
- The six states (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington) that require some or all of the employers in the state to have safety and health programs do so because they are convinced of the value of these programs.<sup>1</sup>
- Opinions expressed to GAO and in response to OSHA and state program requests for public comments on proposed regulations support the value of these programs. These views come from employer and labor groups, individual employers, enforcement agency officials, and academic researchers. For example, none of the 68 individuals and groups that responded to OSHA's request for public comment questioned the value of these programs; their only reservations about issuing voluntary

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<sup>1</sup>With OSHA approval, a state can operate its own state-wide safety and health program instead of relying on enforcement by federal OSHA; 21 states and 2 territories currently do so.

guidance or a mandatory requirement related to implementation issues.

- Although it does not require safety and health programs in all industries, OSHA does require employers to implement these programs for control of specific hazards. For example, OSHA's hazard communication standard and lock-out/tag-out standards both require employers to develop management systems to oversee safety and health at the worksite.

Employee involvement in safety and health programs may be formal, as in the establishment of safety and health committees, or informal, through participation in specific aspects of safety and health programs such as hazard inspections. The three states that require safety and health committees as the mechanism for employee involvement in safety and health programs report that they provide considerable benefits to employers and employees. For example, officials in those states say that

- employers benefit from having workers report complaints to the committee as a first step, because that is a less adversarial action than requesting an OSHA inspection;
- opening lines of communication between employers and employees about hazards provides an opportunity to use the expertise of both parties in correcting problems; and,
- reporting hazardous work conditions to an on-site safety and health committee may get quicker correction than reporting the hazards to OSHA and waiting for an inspection to be done if OSHA thinks a problem exists.

#### Enhancing Limited Enforcement Resources

Requiring worksite safety and health programs, in which employers inspect their own workplaces and correct hazards they find, provides one way to extend enforcement resources. OSHA and the state-approved safety and health programs cannot, through inspections alone, ensure employers' compliance with specific safety and health standards and their general duty to provide workplaces free of hazards. OSHA and the states have enforcement responsibility for laws protecting the safety and health of more than 88 million workers in about 6 million workplaces, yet have fewer than 3,000 inspectors. With those resources, for example, OSHA was able in fiscal year 1989 to inspect only 3 percent of the worksites identified as high hazard for health reasons and 10 percent of those identified as high hazard for safety reasons. Active involvement of employers through safety and health programs may lead to correction of hazards without the necessity of an inspection.

The experiences of Washington and Oregon also suggest that enforcement efforts are enhanced by the presence of worksite safety and health programs. According to inspection officials, when employers have identified hazards and outlined a program to abate them, inspection efforts can be more efficient. In addition, state officials say that when inspectors can read the minutes of safety and health committees and interview committee members, they can better assess the employer's commitment to worksite safety.

**Employers Can Comply With  
Requirement to Implement Safety  
and Health Programs**

Preliminary results of our work for Senator Pell suggest that although several potential barriers to the implementation of worksite safety and health programs exist, states requiring such programs have found ways of addressing these problems. For example, all six states provide free training and consultation services to small employers to help them design and implement their safety and health programs. Similarly, company representatives we spoke with in Washington, where such programs are required, stated that provisions of the state program requirement were general enough that they were able to implement programs that met their needs and the needs of their operations. Inspection results from Oregon show that, in 1990, over 90 percent of the worksites inspected for compliance with the program requirement were in full compliance; the comparable statistic in Washington was about 85 percent.

We are continuing our analyses of data collected in the six states where worksite safety and health programs are required. We look forward to providing you with further details on the ability of employers to implement worksite programs in the future, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide you with the information we have to date.



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