

BRIEFLY...

September 28, 2016

OSHA DOES NOT KNOW IF SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAMS HAVE LONG-TERM INDUSTRYWIDE EFFECT

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

More than half of inspections conducted annually by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and state occupational safety and health agencies are in special emphasis programs (SEP). Both national emphasis programs (NEP) and local emphasis programs (LEP) are used to direct enforcement resources toward high-hazard industries or occupations that pose greater risks of death or severe injury/illness.

This audit builds upon prior audit results that raised concerns about how OSHA targets high-hazard industries and how it determines the impact of its inspection programs. These prior audits found OSHA did not target some of the highest risk industries nationwide in its Site Specific Targeting program, could not demonstrate the impact of penalty reductions as an incentive for employers to improve workplace safety and health, and lacked evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of occupational safety and health programs administered by states.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted this performance audit to determine the following:

Can OSHA demonstrate whether SEPs are effective in improving safety and health conditions for workers in high-hazard industries and occupations?

READ THE FULL REPORT

To view the report, including the scope, methodology, and full agency response, go to: <http://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2016/02-16-201-10-105.pdf>

WHAT OIG FOUND

OSHA could not demonstrate whether its SEPs were effective in improving safety and health conditions for workers in high-hazard industries and occupations. Its performance measurement strategy lacked outcome metrics related to reducing the rate of injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, lessening levels of exposure to health risks, and/or decreasing the frequency of catastrophic events.

OSHA's SEP reviews typically reported results that reflected the one-time correction of hazards identified during individual inspections. For example, 83 percent of OSHA's reviews of federal OSHA LEPs used only inspection statistics to support conclusions on whether programs were effective and should be continued. However, determining that a previously cited hazard had been corrected is not an indicator that the hazard is being addressed throughout the industry.

In addition, for NEPs, OSHA did not have a documented risk assessment methodology for building a risk model each year that captured emerging trends and the latest data regarding high-hazard industries and occupations. OSHA did not develop guidelines to formally weigh all available information on hazards, identify the industries and occupations with the highest level of hazard risk, and then proactively develop and utilize NEPs for those industries and occupations.

Our analysis of data from three major sources of information referenced in NEP directives showed NEPs did not target some high-hazard industries. With neither outcome-based performance metrics nor a documented risk assessment methodology, OSHA could not demonstrate its SEPs focused enforcement resources on the most hazardous industries and occupations posing the greatest risk of death or severe injury/illness to U.S. workers.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

We recommend the Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health establish and use outcome-based performance metrics for all SEPs, and a documented risk assessment methodology for identifying high-hazard industries and occupations. OSHA commented on a number of the findings and recommendations, but nothing in its response changed our report.