

21.1: Introduction to Safety and Health Programs

Programs

A program as defined by Merriam-Webster is a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal. It further defines programs to include applications and types that speak to documenting or outlining the details or arrangement of activity. The intent being that what is being communicated in a program can be duplicated and shared with consistency to all receiving the information.

The main goal of safety and health programs is to prevent workplace injuries, illnesses, and deaths, as well as the suffering and financial hardship these events can cause for workers, their families, and employers. An effective program uses a proactive approach to managing workplace safety and health. Traditional programs are often reactive –that is, problems are addressed only after a worker is injured or becomes sick, a new standard or regulation is published, or an outside inspection finds a problem that must be fixed. Programs implementing practices for finding and fixing hazards before they may result in injury or illness are far more effective for achieving health and safety goals. Documenting and highlighting the program approach is a best practice.

Best Practices

It is important to understand that simply complying with safety standards is not evidence that a safety and health program exists. Employers may often be in compliance simply because of institutional requirements for operating a business enterprise in certain jurisdictions. While compliance with standards is an objective, goals for health and safety should be higher. An overarching theme that goes beyond regulatory compliance should be to create a framework for identifying and controlling hazards, ensuring participation and communication, and achieving both safety and health and other organizational goals.

When starting or developing a health and safety program which may address existing workplace standards begin with a basic outline and simple goals and build from there. The focus should be on achieving goals, monitoring performance, and evaluating outcomes. When the focus is on goals or desired outcomes the workplace can achieve higher levels of safety and health.

OSHA suggests that employers implement recommended practices establishing effective programs for not only better worker health outcomes but other benefits as well. A few of those benefits include:

- Improved compliance with laws and regulations;
- Reduced operational costs, including significant reductions in workers' compensation premiums;
- More engaged workers;
- Enhanced social connectedness and responsibility for meeting environmental and sustainability goals;
- Increased productivity and enhanced business operations;

So what is the model for establishing an effective safety and health program? OSHA suggests employers follow these recommended best practices:

1. Set Safety and Health as a Top Priority

Always set safety and health as the top priority. Tell workers that making sure they finish the day and go home safely is the best way to do business. Assure them of the employer's responsibility to work with them to find and fix any hazards that could injure them or make them sick.

2. Lead By Example

Employers must practice safe behaviors and make safety part of the daily conversations with workers.

3. Implement a Reporting System

Develop and communicate a simple procedure for workers to report any injuries, illnesses, incidents (including near misses/close calls), hazards, or safety and health concerns without fear of retaliation. Include an option for reporting hazards or concerns anonymously.

4. Provide Training

Train workers on how to identify and control hazards using, for example, OSHA's Hazard Identification Training Tool.

5. Conduct Inspections

Inspect the workplace with workers and ask them to identify any activity, piece of equipment, or material that concerns them. Use checklists, such as those included in OSHA's Small Business Handbook, to help identify problems.

6. Collect Hazard Control Ideas

Ask workers for ideas on improvements and follow up on their suggestions. Provide them time during work hours, if necessary, to research solutions.

7. Implement Hazard Controls

Assign workers the task of choosing, implementing, and evaluating the solutions they come up with.

8. Address Emergencies

Identify foreseeable emergency scenarios and develop instructions on what to do in each case. Meet to discuss these procedures and post them in a visible location in the workplace.

9. Seek Input on Workplace Changes

Before making significant changes to the workplace, work organization, equipment, or materials, consult with workers to identify potential safety or health issues.

10. Make Improvements

Set aside a regular time to discuss safety and health issues, with the goal of identifying ways to improve the program.

The above practices can be implemented at any time, in any place. They can weave together existing policy and procedure based on maintaining compliance with standards for emergency planning, electrical safety, machine guarding, and personal protective equipment. The objective is to evaluate existing safety compliance measures against the best practices to create a programmatic approach to safety.

Stand Alone Safety and Health Programs

There are some standards that currently exist as programs with prescriptive requirements and mechanisms for continuous evaluation and monitoring. They include:

1. Hazard Communication
2. Process Safety Management of Highly Hazardous Chemicals
3. Confined Space Entry
4. Lock out/Tag out
5. Hearing Conservation
6. Bloodborne Pathogens

Other standards that may or may not exist as programs in some workplaces and work sites, but should, are:

1. Respiratory Protection
2. Fall Protection
3. Electrical Safety
4. Personal Protective Equipment
5. Safety Training and Education
6. Record Keeping and Reporting

Programs that may exist without specific standards to align with or result from application of the general duty clause include:

1. Drug testing
2. Sexual Harassment
3. Ergonomic Safety
4. Employee Assistance
5. Automotive Repair Shop Safety

It is important to note that all of the above in some cases may exist as part of an overall injury and illness prevention program or plan (IIPP), typical and required in the state of California, that may be detailed enough to allow for measurement of effectiveness

or merely exist as line items on worksite safety plans.

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