



## **Voluntary Program Helps Small Businesses Assure Workplace Safety Compliance**

*By Harry Buysse, Consultation Program Manager, New Mexico Occupational Health and Safety Bureau*

While employers in New Mexico are required to provide safe, hazard-free workplaces, they don't have to hire expensive consultants to identify and eliminate potential dangers.

The New Mexico Occupational Health and Safety Bureau has compliance specialists who work with small businesses, trade groups and unions that want help establishing worksites that are as risk-free and healthy as possible. That goal of such cooperative programs is to reduce industrial injuries and illnesses and lower the costs associated with workplace hazards, including workers' compensation claims and loss of business productivity.



These consultations are voluntary and confidential, and they cost the employer nothing. On-site consultants don't issue citations or penalties during their visits, and they don't report to the bureau's inspectors the unsafe or unhealthy conditions they discover. They only require a commitment from employers to swiftly correct any safety hazards or dangerous practices identified in the visit. Businesses can even qualify for a one-year exemption from routine inspections by the OHSB.

### **Safety makes business sense**

Workplace safety isn't just a legal requirement. It's also a good business practice with a respectable return on investment. According to the national Occupational Safety and Health Administration, "an effective safety and health program can save \$4 to \$6 for every \$1 invested."

A business that meets state and federal safety standards spends less money on liability insurance and enjoys the increased productivity that comes with fewer work stoppages due to accidents, fatalities and injuries; fewer lost workdays; and less damage to equipment and products. Employees who feel safe at work are more productive and less distracted by fears that they're working in an unsafe, unhealthy place.

Besides identifying existing workplace hazards, compliance specialists can help businesses develop safety programs tailored to their industry, workplace culture and circumstances. The

objective is to encourage employers to approach workplace safety as an ongoing concern of all employees at all levels.

A successful safety program goes further than just posting the company's safety and health policies in a prominent place — though that's important too. It includes soliciting safety ideas from employees and responding to their concerns about hazardous materials, unhealthy working conditions and risks that might not be immediately obvious.

### State-specific laws

All federal laws that apply to workplace safety apply in New Mexico as well. But the state has some laws that exceed federal guidelines in a few areas and laws that address problems not covered by federal standards.

For example, in 2004, in response to a rash of assaults — some fatal — on convenience store workers, the state passed laws requiring security cameras at convenience stores and beefed up staffing on evening shifts. Other state-specific rules aim to protect the health of agricultural workers and public sector firefighters.

The New Mexico OHSB, which is part of the New Mexico Environment Department, oversees safety compliance in all private and public sector workplaces except for those under exclusive federal jurisdiction. Exceptions include workplaces on Indian reservations and military bases and in the maritime and mining industries.

For more information about the OHSB's compliance resources and consultants, call (505)476-8720 or visit [www.nmenv.state.nm.us/Ohsb\\_Website/](http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/Ohsb_Website/).

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