

# DEATH ON THE JOB: The toll of neglect

For 30 years the AFL-CIO has been reporting on job safety. Progress has stalled.

By Don McIntosh

April 28 marked 50 years since the law creating the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) took effect. Since then, the agency has prevented hundreds of thousands of workplace deaths. But lately progress has slowed. Every year since 1992 the AFL-CIO—the federation most unions belong to—has published a report on workplace fatalities, looking at causes, trends, and the resources dedicated to keeping workers safe. The 2021 edition of the *Death on the Job* report shows OSHA resources have been declining.

OSHA staff levels are near their lowest since the agency opened 50 years ago. In 1980, the peak of federal OSHA staffing, there were 1,469 federal OSHA inspectors—14.8 per million workers. Today, there are only 901 federal OSHA inspectors, 6.1 per million workers.

The report's fatality statistics are based on 2019, the most recent year for which comprehensive data are available. Of the 50 states, Washington was the 5th safest, with 2.3 deaths per 100,000 workers. Oregon was the 20th safest, with 3.5 deaths per 100,000 workers.

"The toll of workplace injury, illness and death remains too high," the report concludes.

The *Death on the Job* report is 262 pages in all. Here are some highlights.

## U.S. workers killed on the job: 5,333

### DEATH BY THE NUMBERS

(fatalities per 100,000 workers in 2019)

Nationwide 3.5

Washington 2.3

Oregon 3.5

Idaho 4.1

California 2.5

Highest fatality rates

Alaska 14.1

Wyoming 12.0

North Dakota 9.7

Montana 7.8

West Virginia 6.4

### MOST DANGEROUS INDUSTRIES

(fatalities per 100,000 workers in 2019)

Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting 23.1

Mining, quarrying, oil and gas extraction 14.6

Transportation and warehousing 13.9

Construction 9.7

Wholesale trade 4.9

### TOP CAUSES OF DEATH ON THE JOB

**#1** Transportation accidents, especially roadway crashes — 2,122 deaths

**#2** Falls, slips and trips — 880 deaths

**#3** Workplace violence — 841 deaths

### UNDERSTAFFED PROTECTORS

- To inspect the 10.1 million workplaces under its jurisdiction, OSHA has only 1,798 inspectors (774 federal and 1,024 state)
- That works out to one inspector for every 82,881 workers.
- Oregon has 77 inspectors, one for every 25,370 employees
- Washington has 116 inspectors, one for every 29,648 employees
- Florida has the worst ratio of all — one inspector per 164,520 workers.
- Years it would take before OSHA could expect all job sites: Washington, at 55 years, is the best in the nation. Oregon 76 years, is next. The worst? Arkansas, 531 years.

### UNDERPOWERED SANCTIONS

- The median employer penalty, under federal OSHA, for killing a worker: \$12,144.
- The median employer penalty, under state OSHA agencies, for killing a worker: \$6,899

## COVID-19 strikes the workplace

A new and deadly hazard stalked workplaces in 2020: COVID-19. Here's some of the tally so far.

**Nursing homes** Between May 24, 2020, and March 28, 2021, at least 563,575 cases of COVID-19 among nursing home staff were confirmed, with 193,919 suspected infections, 1,875 deaths and 170 reinfections.

**Health care** At least 458,134 health care personnel were infected and 1,524 died as of April 4, 2021.

**Corrections** According to the CDC data, there have been 87,815 cases and 143 deaths among correctional staff between March 31, 2020, and April 2, 2021.

**Agribusiness** The nonprofit Food and Environment Reporting Network has reported 1,833 outbreaks in the meatpacking, food-processing and farming industries, resulting in at least 89,068 infections and 378 deaths between April 22, 2020, and April 5, 2021.

### SEE THE FULL REPORT

[aflcio.org/reports/death-job-toll-neglect-2021](https://aflcio.org/reports/death-job-toll-neglect-2021)



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Katie Fairbanks, a reporter with *The Daily News* in Longview, Washington, votes by mail to join the Pacific Northwest NewsGuild. "This is something that we believe will make the newspaper stronger," Fairbanks says.

## Longview news reporters go union

Newsroom staff at *The Daily News* in Longview, Washington voted 6-0 to unionize with NewsGuild-Communications Workers of America (CWA) in mail ballots counted May 14. It's the latest in a wave of unionization at news organizations around the nation.

The key issue is stability, says union supporter Katie Fairbanks: The paper's eight newsroom staff members love their work,

but wages of less than \$17 an hour make it hard to stick around. Fairbanks says turnover is so high at *The Daily News* that its most senior reporter has been there only five years. Lee Enterprises, the Iowa-headquartered chain that owns *The Daily News*, didn't mount an antiunion campaign or try to talk workers out of unionizing. Workers expect to begin negotiations soon on a first union contact.