

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPORTING ON WORKER INJURIES, ILLNESSES AND DEATHS



The impact of the press in preventing worker injuries, illnesses and deaths



1

Press attention to an OSHA citation resulted in a reduction by 73% of violations among employers in the same industry within about 3 miles of the offending employer's location. (Safety and Health, June 2020)

Bad press inspires employers to address unsafe conditions.

"More times than not, employers were most concerned about media attention affecting their business and people in the community thinking poorly of them." (Industrial Safety and Hygiene News, 2017)

2

A single OSHA press release about fines levied against a company can have the same effect as 200-plus agency inspections when it comes to future compliance by the offending employer, as well as those nearby in the same industry, according to a Duke University study. (Safety and Health, June 2020)

3

QUESTIONABLE QUOTES:

But accidents and injuries on many job sites are inevitable, experts concede. "That's why it's crucial to help employees manage their well-being and mindset"

Washington Post, We know what it's like: Workers in dangerous jobs empathize with NFL's Hamlin, 1/6/2023

"This was an unfortunate accident but it was the result of human error",

Boston Herald, Three workers rescued after building collapse at South Boston Edison plant, 2/17/2023

INACCURATE HEADLINES:

Caterpillar faces big fine after worker incinerated in freak accident.

New York Post, 11/16/2023

Additional resources for stories about worker injuries, illnesses and fatalities:

- **National COSH:**
www.nationalcosh.org
[Killed at Work Database](#)

Local and state expertise:
nationalcosh.org/about-us/local-cosh-groups

- [Confined Space newsletter](#) (focus on workplace safety & labor issues):
- **AFL-CIO**
[Death on the Job Report](#)
- **CPWR**
[Construction Chartbook](#)

Relevant articles:

[Read all about it: the role of media in improving construction safety and health](#), Scott Schneider, Pietra Check, Journal of Safety Research, 2010

[Pushing back on the idea of freak accidents](#), Scott Schneider, Laborers Health and Safety Fund of North America, 2019

[Freak accidents don't kill workers, bad managements do](#), Jordan Barab, DC Report, 2022

COMMON FINDINGS AND PITFALLS IN REPORTING ON WORKER INJURIES, ILLNESSES AND FATALITIES

Nearly all workplace injuries, illnesses and fatalities are preventable by employers enacting comprehensive safety and health programs, with the active engagement of workers. When reporters use the term "accident", however – particularly "freak accident" – it conveys that these events are random, and not predictable or preventable.. OSHA instead uses the term "incident" to avoid this messaging. (citations: [osha.gov/incident-investigation](https://www.osha.gov/incident-investigation)).



Injuries involving "human error" rarely exist in a vacuum. Incidents that appear to be caused by "human error" almost always could have been prevented by implementing widely recognized safety measures or addressing systemic problems in the workplace. Employers are responsible for implementing safety measures to account for the prospect of human or systematic errors.



"Resolving safety issues is not as simple as finding a couple of workers to blame and getting rid of them – even if they made a mistake. Because if you don't identify and address the root causes of a problem, everyone may feel a lot better for a while, but the problem will inevitably repeat itself," says former Deputy Assistant Secretary and current Confined Space editor Jordan Barab.



RESPONSIBLE REPORTING

AVOID



Referring to a workplace injury, illness or death as an accident.

Using the term "freak" to describe the incident.

Ascribing the cause of an incident as due to human error.

Asking workers if they are undocumented.

INSTEAD



Report it as an incident or a workplace injury, illness or death.

Report about patterns that make the type of incident potentially preventable.

Investigate safety measures that have been (or could have been) enacted to prevent the incident, taking into consideration that humans make errors.

Report about the context workers face that makes it difficult for workers to speak up about hazards that can then lead to injury, illness and death.

CHECKLIST FOR RESPONSIBLE REPORTING

- ✓ Assume workplace incidents are preventable, unless proven otherwise. Focus on root causes and system failures instead of individual worker mistakes.
- ✓ Research the company's history of previous OSHA violations. Have they been cited before? For the same or similar violations? Has anyone been killed or seriously injured at this workplace, or other workplace(s) owned by the company?
- ✓ Research the law. For example, most people don't know that public employees are not covered by OSHA in most states. So when a public employee is killed on the job in a state that doesn't provide public employee coverage, don't let the employer claim that OSHA will investigate it.
- ✓ Challenge the employer's statements. Employers sometimes claim that they are in full compliance with laws and regulations. If someone is seriously hurt or killed, there most likely was a violation. Employers often try to blame the worker for not following procedures or claim that they had no idea there was a hazard even though there was a well-recognized violation
- ✓ Talk to workers and their families, not just employers. Workers are often well aware of the health and safety problems in a workplace, and may have complained about them before. Family members often describe a worker's concern about unsafe conditions before their injury or death. But workers are often warned not to talk to reporters, so reporters may have to seek them out after work and take measures to keep them anonymous.
- ✓ Follow up. OSHA has six months to issue a violation. Determine if there was an OSHA investigation and what if any citations were issued and follow up to see if any conditions were fixed as a result. Sometimes employers contest citations, so it can be months or even years until there is final determination. Even if there are no OSHA citations there still may be dangerous conditions.
- ✓ Include information and resources to prevent future tragedies. Workers and employers will look to your articles to determine how to prevent similar future incidents. Provide information on safety measures and existing OSHA standards that can address hazards that resulted in workplace injury and death. NIOSH (the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) often provides recommendations on how to prevent injuries and illnesses. (See resource section.)
- ✓ Highlight worker efforts to address unsafe work conditions. Stories of workers taking action are a powerful counterpoint to the tragedy of workplace injury and death.
- ✓ Contact workers and experts about the incident and how to prevent it. National COSH is a network of local and state organizations that work directly with workers across many industries that can bring on-the-ground voice to your story. We also engage a network of health and safety experts areas who can contribute information about data as well as standards and industry practices.