

Taking a Stand

Alberta's 10-point plan for safe and healthy workplaces.

Over a four-day stretch in October, workplace incidents claimed the lives of four Albertans. Killed were a 42-year-old man run over by a co-worker's vehicle, a 71-year-old construction worker who fell from a ladder, a 58-year-old oilfield worker crushed by equipment and a 74-year-old man struck by a metal cylinder. The workers' deaths were a reminder that despite ongoing initiatives to reduce the number of on-the-job injuries and fatalities, more work was needed.

Workplace incidents like these — and the 110 fatalities that occurred in the province in 2009 — have motivated the Alberta government to take even stronger action on occupational health and safety. In July, Employment and Immigration Minister Thomas Lukaszuk introduced a 10-point plan to ensure Albertans could continue to have confidence in the health and safety of their workplaces.

"Let this serve as official notice for any Alberta company that doesn't want to play by the rules," Lukaszuk said at the time. "Today is a new day for Occupational Health and Safety in Alberta."

The first step in the original 10-point plan was publicly releasing updated compliance and enforcement procedures. There are now new, clearer rules around when to issue orders, when to stop use of equipment or stop work completely, and when a director's order should be used to take a problem employer to court.

The second step in August was announcing the template showing what information government would be releasing about all employers' injury records.

In September, the third point was implemented when those records were posted online. The records include worksite injuries and fatalities for more than 140,000 employers insured by the Workers' Compensation Board — Alberta.

When the records went live on the Employment and Immigration website on September 30, it was the first time information of its kind had been made public in Canada. The records will be updated annually, and the ministry is open to ideas about the types of information that will be released.

Discontinuing the "Best Safety Performer Awards," was the fourth point in the plan.

"Now that all employer records are public, Albertans can make their own decisions about how companies are performing," said Lukaszuk.

The fifth point is to revisit the Work Safe Alberta strategy, beginning at a November 8 forum. During the forum, Lukaszuk spoke about the need for a culture of workplace safety on work sites and challenged participants to develop a 10-point plan for their own organizations.



Paul Douglas, president and CEO of PCL Constructors Inc., was among those who attended the forum and took the minister's challenge to heart. Douglas said health and safety is an integral part of the company's workplace culture with staff meetings, conferences, orientations and even performance reviews beginning with a safety message.

"If safety is embedded in everything you do, you're not just touching on safety, you're doing smart business," said Douglas.

The sixth point in the plan, a review of the Certificate of Recognition (COR) program is underway, and changes are in the works.

Seventh was increasing the resources behind health and safety enforcement. New OHS officers have been hired.

The eighth point is reviewing all open orders identified in an Auditor General's report earlier this year. This review is almost complete and there is an escalation process in place for any future non-compliance.

Ninth, better internal software is being introduced, to provide better occupational health and safety information.

And the last of the 10 points is after hours and weekend inspections.

"How can we say we are serious about worksite safety when the response to an incident on Saturday is that we will come to the worksite on Monday?" asked Lukaszuk.

With four of those points now completed, Lukaszuk has announced four new initiatives. They include identifying new ways to reduce work-related motor vehicle incidents and work-related diseases, formalizing the process to ensure that family input is sought in creative sentencing, and hiring additional occupational health and safety officers bringing the total number to 102.

"Work-related diseases and vehicle incidents are killing more workers than injuries are," said Lukaszuk. "It is time we took steps to reduce these work-related fatalities."

In the last year, incidents of job-related illness and injury have dropped in Alberta. The provincial lost-time claim rate for 2009 was 1.69 per 100 full-time jobs, down almost 10 per cent from the previous year. Occupational fatalities were also down, from 166 in 2008 to 110 in 2009. **CB**

For more information on government initiatives to keep Alberta workers healthy and safe, visit www.employment.alberta.ca/obs