

Tips for Complying With the New Law

Because the July 1 compliance deadline for SB 108 is only a week away, you should start putting together an injury- and illness-prevention program immediately. By implementing the following seven steps, you will be in compliance with the new law.

■ Designate a responsible person within the firm to create and implement the program. Avoid choosing someone from either extreme in the company's chain of command. An employee from the lowest level will not have the authority necessary to convince other employees to take the program seriously. Using a high-level executive will remove the possibility of appealing to someone else when difficult decisions have been implemented.

Small organizations should probably stay away from creating a safety committee. While many workers' compensation carriers are currently suggesting this should be done, it is not very practical because of the tendency for committees to waste time trying to accomplish a complex task.

■ Prepare a comprehensive inventory of all hazards in your workplace. Be thorough by carefully inspecting all aspects of the workplace and reviewing records of all previous workers' compensation claims. Carefully evaluate the way workers actually perform their particular functions and add any hazardous practices to the inventory list.

■ Use the hazard inventory to establish different classes of jobs based on the hazards that workers are exposed to as they perform their work. Then write a general injury/illness prevention policy for all workers, as well as subpolicies for each class of workers. Make sure that the policies identify all hazards and specify the proper procedures and/or use of protective equipment that employees must use to minimize injuries and illnesses.

■ Establish a system that will ensure that your company will follow through on its injury- and illness-prevention responsibilities. The system should include a plan for periodic safety inspections of all workstations, a procedure for investigating accidents and a process of correcting hazardous conditions as they are discovered. Supervisors should be prepared to impose disciplinary measures on any employees who don't follow prevention guidelines.

■ Establish a training program for all current employees and new hires. Training may be conducted either in a classroom or on the job by supervisors or others who know all the proper procedures and the appropriate use of protective equipment. Document all training in the file of each employee and new hire.

■ Provide for a system of ongoing communication with all employees regarding the company's illness- and injury-prevention program. Consider using flyers and/or company publications to communicate about specific hazards. Promote the use of suggestion boxes and other communications from employees to management regarding the presence of hazardous conditions, equipment or substances in their jobs. Be sure to encourage anonymous communications from employees regarding safety concerns.

■ Maintain the written injury- and illness-prevention policies and records in a central location where they're available to all employees. Obtain Material Safety Data Sheets from all of your chemical vendors

POINT OF VIEW

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and operating instruction booklets from all of your equipment vendors. Keep these items current and store them in a place where employees can easily and frequently consult them.

Finally, here are a few general tips you should keep in mind:

First, wherever possible, incorporate employee participation into the development and implementation of your company's program to encourage them to take responsibility for working more safely.

Second, look for opportunities to strengthen your company's compliance efforts by soliciting independent opinions of your written program from safety engineers, Cal/OSHA's Consultation Service and workers' compensation carrier representatives.

Third, be cautious of any "off the shelf" program or other shortcuts that don't take all the variables of your specific company, workplace and industry into account.

Fourth, resist the temptation to ignore some or all of the law's requirements or to postpone your compliance efforts.

Owners and managers of California businesses and nonprofits have a real opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to their employees' health and well-being by complying with the requirements in SB 108.

By following these steps, you can develop a practical program that will promote safer working conditions and decrease the drain on productivity caused by workers' illnesses and injuries.

The Point of View column provides a forum to comment on important business subjects.