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PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS

OPINION

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Friendly is fine but workplace safety is first

The mention of OSHA brings a twinge of terror to the minds of many businesspeople in Hawaii -- visions of hostile government employees out to harass a business into complying with often obscure federal safety laws.

In previous state administrations in Hawaii, there was at least some basis for that fear.

Kitty Lagareta, CEO of Communications Pacific, a business-consulting firm, repeatedly maintained that she once was harassed by Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspectors because of her support for Linda Lingle, a Republican who now is governor. Then-Gov. Ben Cayetano challenged Lagareta's allegations.

With Lingle's administration now in control of state government, things have changed and the Hawaii Occupational Safety and Health division, or HIOSH, has become more "business friendly"-- in part by not filling 26 of the 71 positions in the division.

Federal OSHA officials understandably have expressed concern that the cutbacks have compromised safety at Hawaii workplaces, especially construction sites, by mitigating the enforcement aspect.

Nelson Befitel, the state's labor director, says there still is safety monitoring, but it's being done in a more consultative and cooperative manner. When minor problems are identified, for example, the business is given time to fix the issue and there is no citation if things are resolved.

Certainly, the confrontational attitudes that typified HIOSH in the past weren't necessary or even particularly effective. Still, we are skeptical that the state can fulfill its federal mandate to ensure workplace safety with 37 percent fewer employees. The indisputable bottom line is ensuring workplace safety.

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