A Safe Drive? OSHA Driving Standard May Be Closer Than It Appears

Work-related roadway crashes kill more employees each year than any other occupational cause of death. Anyone who drives a motor vehicle on the job—about 4.2 million workers in 2001—is at risk. Job descriptions range from long haul trucking to pizza delivery, from school busing to construction. Between 1992 and 2001, 13,337 civilian workers died in crashes, or about four deaths a day during that period, according to NIOSH.

In addition to the devastating human toll of these deaths to employers, communities and families, companies face massive productivity losses and soaring medical and workers' compensation costs.

To counter these problems, OSHA is bringing more agency resources to bear down on the problem of occupational driving fatalities. The agency traditionally has viewed on-the-job driving safety less as a federal occupational issue and more as one best handled through laws and regulations in municipalities and states.

OSHA will revive a 1997 presidential executive order, mandating seat belt use by U.S. workers on government business, told to the March 2004 meeting of the Federal Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, which examines safety issues targeted to federal employees.

Traffic safety advocates are applauding the move. As far back as 1990, OSHA scuttled proposals to implement a federal standard that would require drivers to wear seat belts and employers to provide mandatory driver training. Opponents called a federal standard duplicative, citing existing seat belt laws in many states.

Feature at a Glance

Motor vehicle crashes are the top cause of workplace fatalities. The federal government is taking a new look at the issue, bringing emphasis to the statistics and the need for employers to view driving safety in the same light as other areas of occupational safety.

Key points

- In a 10-year period, 13,337 civilian workers died in workplace vehicle crashes — about four deaths a day.
- OSHA will appoint a special assistant to John Henshaw to focus on workplace motor vehicle safety.
- Employers need to take the lead on safety, especially on issues such as seat belts and distracted driving.
- Successful corporate safe driving programs have reduced incidents, reduced workers' compensation costs and provided more money to the company bottom line.

For more information

- OSHA
  www.osha.gov
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
  www.nhtsa.dot.gov
- Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration
  www.fmcsa.dot.gov
- NIOSH
  www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage/html
- National Safety Council
  www.nsc.org
- 2004 National Safety Month
  www.nsc.org/nsm

Cause and Prevention

Driving from and to work is not viewed universally as a workplace safety issue in the same way that chemical exposure, machine guarding, or ergonomics are. The impact on the workplace, however, is well known. Roadway crashes lead all other causes of fatal incidents on the job, making up 22 percent of workplace deaths, according to an April 2004 NIOSH hazard review, "Work-Related Roadway Crashes: Challenges and Opportunities for Prevention." By comparison, 13 percent of U.S. workers die each year from workplace homicide and 10 percent die from falls.

During the period 1992 and 2001, the great majority of victims of occupational driving fatalities—89 percent—were male. The 35-44 year-old age group accounted for 25 percent of the fatalities.

With the annual cost to U.S. employers from on-the-job traffic crashes reaching about $40 billion, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), employers are beginning to understand that they must do more to protect workers who drive for them.

Between 1992 and 2001, 62 percent of vehicles occupied by a worker killed in a crash were registered to a business or governmental entity; 17 percent were registered to the driver, according to NIOSH.

Increasingly, employers have instituted their own internal driving standards, procedures, and regulations, covering everything from seat belt use to fleet vehicle selection to use of personal vehicles on company business.

Nationwide has a vehicle fleet of 5,400 in addition to about 3,000 drivers who use their personal vehicles on company business.

To ensure compliance, Nationwide checks quarterly the driving record of those who drive company-owned vehicles, attaching points to drivers who show moving violations and preventable crashes. At different point levels, drivers are required to take remedial actions to improve. If they reach a maximum number of points they could lose their privilege to drive company vehicles.

Feature at a Glance

Advanced enforcement technology such as red-light cameras, aircraft and improved communications are helping police combat traffic violations.

Key points

- More than 100 metropolitan areas have installed red-light cameras to photograph vehicles that illegally enter intersections.
- Public awareness of cameras and other automated enforcement technology have helped make drivers more cautious.
- Speed cameras offer police a mobile solution against lead-footed motorists.
- Many police departments have begun using aircraft to help deter aggressive driving.
- Digital radios and in-car computers have dramatically improved communication in law enforcement.

For more information

- Visit *www.hwysafety.org* for a Q&A fact sheet on red-light cameras.
- For guidance on using red-light cameras visit *http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/rlcguide.*
- National Motorists Association *www.motorists.com/issues/enforce*
- South Dakota Highway Patrol *http://hp.state.sd.us/greeting.htm*
- Kansas Highway Patrol *www.kansashighwaypatrol.org*

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