



Freedom to Report Real News
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State's Worst Department Improving Under New Director

By Malia Zimmerman, 4/27/2004 3:15:58 AM

The Department of Labor and Industrial Relations has long been considered the worst run department of all state departments in Hawaii.

The staff has had an extreme anti-business attitude, openly referring to business owners "the enemy."

Jennifer Shishido, the director of the Hawaii Occupational Safety and Health Division or HIOSH, was highlighted as one of the people most hostile to business in Hawaii in a 1999 report issued by the Small Business Regulatory Review Board appointed by then Gov. Benjamin Cayetano. The taskforce interviewed more than 300 business owners and operators before completing the 11-page report.

In fact, in 1999 and 2000, businesses and safety consultants proposed shutting down the state's HIOSH division altogether and letting the federal government inspection division, Occupational Safety & Health Administration or OSHA, handle all safety inspections in the state.

But that negative image is slowly changing under the new director, Nelson Befitel, appointed by Gov. Linda Lingle in 2002, with the mandate to improve the state's business climate.

One sign of change -- the State of Hawaii and the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) recently recognized eight Hawaii companies for exemplary safety and health management systems based on federal standards.

Befitel says the national awards represent a significant achievement in the Lingle-Aiona Administration's efforts to ensure safe and healthy workplace environments for employees, while also fostering a business-friendly climate that enhances employee productivity and reduces costs to businesses.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor-OSHA John L. Henshaw joined Governor Linda Lingle, Lt. Governor James R. "Duke" Aiona, Jr., and Befitel in honoring the Hawaii businesses.

Why is Business Paper Bashing Department That's Improved Safety, Become More Business Friendly?

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Three of the companies were recognized for achieving Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) status, and five businesses were honored for successfully completing the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP).

VPP promotes effective work site-based safety and health through established cooperative relationships of management, labor, and OSHA. The SHARP program recognizes small employers who operate exemplary safety and health management systems.

Three companies have achieved VPP status:

- Chevron Hawaii Refinery
- Frito-Lay of Hawaii, Ltd.
- Dick Pacific Construction Co.

Five small businesses are the first in Hawaii to receive SHARP credentials for exemplary safety and health management systems, including:

- KD Construction Inc.
- Nordic Construction Ltd.
- RCI Construction Group
- Pacific Group; Jayar Construction
- Kimi Hotels Inc. dba Maui Seaside Hotel

Befitel says, "This Administration's approach has been to work as a partner with businesses, to assist them with accident prevention and containment costs. These partnerships demonstrate that we have made significant strides in changing the way our Department, particularly HIOSH, is doing business. The fact that eight Hawaii businesses today have received national recognition compared to just one 16 months ago shows that this collaborative approach is working. We look forward to partnering with other companies to enhance their workplace safety programs."

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