



Freedom to Report Real News

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

What's Up With That?

By Nathan Retlaw, 9/15/2004 4:26:02 AM

Have our memories degraded to the point we don't remember the "Banana Republic" in Hawaii?

Remember the days under Gov. Benjamin Cayetano where small business owners lived in a constant fear of retaliation by state government officials working for Cayetano? Remember the random tax audits that occurred routinely and the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (HIOSH) inspections with large fines for minor infractions for political "enemies" of the governor? How about the State's attitude toward employers and the huge gap that existed between the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations and business owners?

The *Pacific Business News* seems to have forgotten. Recently the editor published an article expressing concern that the Federal government is concerned that the "... state watchdog (HIOSH) is too friendly."

See <http://www.assehawaii.org/HIOSH9-3-04.pdf>

The article indicates the Federal evaluation report for the State Plan criticizes Gov. Linda Lingle and her administration at the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations as being "too business friendly", in part because the vacancies in the HIOSH Department have not been filled.

For those who know the facts about this department -- before Gov. Lingle took over and after -- the article and report are absolutely baffling.

The data in the article showed the number of inspections for 2003 when Gov. Linda Lingle had been in office one year, increased from 2002, when she was just getting into office. The table also showed the number of consultation services to employers increased, and the construction industry, the industry with the second highest number of on-the-job injuries, saw a decline in work-related accidents. These are undisputable positives.

The negative article also included a table showing the injuries for the Construction industry for 2002 as 8.6 per 100 employees, but does not accurately or fully report this is down from 9.0 in 2001 or 9.8 in 2000.

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As to the many vacant funded inspector positions within HIOSH, which the article notes -- the answer is simple. The State salary for HIOSH inspectors is one of the lowest in the State -- little wonder the department cannot fill the vacancies.

Every small business owner understands the constant juggling between the cost of high quality and well-paid employees with the ever-changing budgets and increased demand in services. The state is no different and the mere process to change and upgrade positions to meet the demands of the programs for HIOSH is almost impossible.

The bottom line -- if the Federal officials feel the vacancies are a problem because the program has suffered, then their own numbers do not support their conclusion.

More importantly if Federal officials believe the vacancies are a real problem, they can always increase the grants to the state so a decent salary can be offered. After all, the Federal grant for the state plan has not increased significantly in at least 10 years.

Finally, an interesting conflict exists with the methodologies for the evaluation of the state plans as identified by the government accounting office. For years GAO has criticized OSHA for the inadequate performance measures and evaluations of state plans and they have not changed.

So now it is 2004 the governor and the Director of the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations Nelson Befitel have accomplished more in 2003 than in 2002 with less people.

They've increased the partnerships and started to change the attitude of the regulatory agency within the state from one that punished and put businesses out of business, to one of partnering with business to make the workplace safer.

If the only real "hit" in the evaluation is that vacancies were not filled, and the standards not adopted (which is really paperwork), and the inspection scheduling program does not hit construction (the second highest in the state), then we are far better off than we were in 2002.

The Governor and the director also saw a reduction in the injuries/illnesses from 9.0 to 8.6 for Construction -- again a reduction with less people.

If the Governor has accomplished more in 2003 with less people, and helped create a safer worker environment, isn't that a good thing?

The PBN article did not have a point and we have to wonder ... what's up with that?