



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Adams (NC-12)

Subcommittee on Workforce Protections

Examining the Policies and Practices of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Zoom

Wednesday, May 25, 2022 | 12:00 p.m.

Today, we are meeting to discuss the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's, or OSHA's, priorities and their role in protecting the health and safety of our nation's workers.

Since 1970, OSHA's mission has been to reduce workplace deaths, injuries, and illnesses. When OSHA was first authorized, 38 workers were killed on the job every day from acute injuries. Fifty-two years later, that figure has fallen to 14 deaths per day in a workforce that is double the size.

OSHA's critical safety standards and enforcement have directly contributed to these improvements.

Nevertheless, workers continue to be injured, made ill, or killed on the job. Fatal workplace rates have stalled after decades of decline and many causes of occupational disease remain unregulated or underregulated.

As we have explored in previous hearings, the spread of COVID-19 caused the worst worker safety crisis in OSHA's history and served as a stress test of OSHA's capacity to address hazards and respond nimbly. This virus also has a mind of its own—prolonging the need for robust efforts to protect Americas workers.

Regrettably, OSHA was missing in action throughout the Trump administration and in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, the former administration refused to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard that would have increased worker protections while workplace COVID-19 outbreaks claimed the lives of workers across the country. Moreover, a report from the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis found that the previous administration intentionally weakened OSHA guidance for COVID mitigation at employers' requests.

Simply put, the former administration turned its back on workers to support employers' bottom line.

The Trump administration's inaction on behalf of workers—and vigorous action on behalf of corporations—adds to decades of attacks by prior administrations, past Congresses, and conservative Courts that left OSHA weakened. Combined, this means that the Biden administration was at a disadvantage when making worker protection a priority.

Unfortunately, the consequences of prioritizing politics over hard science falls on the shoulders of hard-working Americans.

Thankfully, the Biden administration has taken science-based steps to address the COVID-19 pandemic, protect workers, and keep our businesses open. The administration launched the largest vaccination campaign in history – working hand-in-hand with the business community.

Making our workplaces safer helped the U.S. economy create 6.6 million jobs in 2021 – the strongest job growth of any year on record — and most importantly, allowed workers to get back to work safely.

Despite this historic comeback, the Biden administration has struggled to make up for OSHA’s past inaction and even, at times, its own stumbles.

Notably, the administration failed to successfully implement an Emergency Temporary Standard, or an E-T-S, which would have increased protections for workers. After a three-month delay, the first E-T-S was narrow in scope and only extended protections to health care workers. While this was an important step, it left millions of workers without adequate protection from COVID-19. Regrettably, the administration let this E-T-S expire, and its fate is still unknown. The second E-T-S, the vaccine or test standard, was blocked by the conservative-controlled Supreme Court.

While the American Rescue Plan delivered historic resources to help OSHA develop these Emergency Temporary Standards, we remain concerned that funding has not yet been used to adequately staff OSHA and deliver on its mission.

Moving forward, the administration must take meaningful, science-based actions to keep workers safe on the job—including issuing an enforceable COVID-19 workplace safety standard for all workers.

To ensure OSHA has the resources it needs to do its job, I am committed to working with my colleagues to update the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and advance meaningful proposals introduced by my colleagues, so the agency can protect workers’ health and safety in 21st century workplaces.

If we care about workers’ well-being and want to keep businesses open, then we must work together to invest in and strengthen OSHA.

So, thank you, Assistant Secretary Parker for your service to workers, and I look forward to a meaningful discussion.