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Health Care Workers Are Most Injured, Left Disproportionately Unprotected by Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Statement of Keith Wrightson, Worker Safety and Health Advocate, Public Citizen

The government has a legal duty to provide a safe workplace for every employee in the country, but it isn't fulfilling this duty for health care workers.

Health care workers fall victim to more on-the-job injuries than workers in any other industry. More than 650,000 health care workers missed days of work in 2010. They are especially at risk of injuries from unsafe ergonomic conditions and from workplace violence. They even lose their lives.

In fact, the rate of work-related musculoskeletal disorders for nursing facilities workers was the highest in the nation in 2011 and more than seven times the national rate for all employees. What's more, nursing care facilities workers were seven times more at risk of injury from workplace violence than average employees.

Also of concern for health care workers are injuries caused by sharp objects like surgical instruments and needles, which can expose them to HIV, the hepatitis B virus and hepatitis C virus. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) issued a rule in the 1990s to reduce injuries caused by sharp objects, but U.S. health care workers still report nearly than 400,000 injuries from sharp objects each year. That's way too many.

Injuries carry an enormous price tag. Costs associated with back injuries in the health care industry are estimated to be more than \$7 billion annually, according to one study.

OSHA would be the first to agree that health care workers are exposed to serious hazards. OSHA's leader, David Michaels, has said that it is "unacceptable" that the people we rely on to care for us when we are sick or injured are the people who suffer the most injuries on the job.

But OSHA has devoted relatively little effort to addressing the safety risks in health care compared to other highly afflicted industries. For example, health care workers

outnumber construction workers more than two-to-one, but OSHA conducts only about one-twentieth as many inspections of health care facilities as construction site.

The shortage of inspections tells only part of the story. OSHA also lacks the necessary standards to cite employers in the health care industry for placing their employees in harm's way. For instance, no standard exists for unsafe ergonomic conditions or workplace violence.

In fairness to OSHA, the process for creating standards has become so cumbersome and subject to interference that the agency cannot possibly meet its mandates. For instance, the agency published a rule in 2000 to protect workers in all industries from ergonomic hazards, but Congress repealed the rule before it took effect. More recently, it attempted to gather data on musculoskeletal injuries but was blocked by Congress.

OSHA must do more to ensure that the workers in health care facilities are adequately protected. It needs to vastly increase its number of inspections of health care facilities, and it needs to issue new rules to protect workers against recognized hazards. This will require the cooperation of Congress, which will need to increase funding and stop blocking OSHA's efforts to issues needed safeguards.

The health care industry has grown rapidly in recent years and promises explosive growth in the years to come. The government's deficit in protecting health care workers also will continue to grow in coming years unless Congress and the agency take aggressive action.

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