

Prevention Initiative for Alberta's

Occupational Health and Safety System

2020 - 21 Annual Update

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Introduction

The OHS system is composed of many stakeholders, including employers, workers, associations and government to name some. Collaboration between these, and other, groups creates knowledge about what needs to be done to keep workers healthy and safe on the job and ensure preventative measures are in place. Keeping workers and workplaces healthy and safe is the ultimate goal of the Prevention Initiative for Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) System (the Prevention Initiative).

Stakeholders have come together to take strategic actions that can have the greatest impacts on illness and injury reduction. This includes sharing information and stakeholder knowledge to create evidence-informed approaches that raise awareness of disease and injury areas where workers are most affected and/or have the greatest risk.

In its second year, the Prevention Initiative's strategic steering committee (SSC) and three working groups have focused actions, aligned resources and created linkages to enhance communication among system stakeholders. These groups have discussed how to evaluate progress and continuously improve OHS efforts to achieve goals more systematically.

This annual update reviews actions taken from April 2020 to August 2021, and outlines the path the Prevention Initiative had set for this timeline. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted priorities for many, including OHS system partners, and some initiative activities were delayed while attention was turned to managing the workplace impacts of COVID-19. These enormous efforts by all stakeholders are recognized.

Continuing the work of the Prevention Initiative

Prevention Initiative principles

Related to the internal responsibility system¹, the foundational principles for the initiative are:

- all system stakeholders have a responsibility to reduce the rate of occurrence of OHS incidences;
- OHS system stakeholders will look for ways to collaborate and partner with each other to increase their reach for the goal of positive OHS outcomes; and
- the priorities identified allow OHS system stakeholders to develop specific actions based on work site needs while still being aligned to the system.

System priorities and stakeholder engagement

Three priority areas that have been identified through analytical and stakeholder feedback methods are experienced in all industries in Alberta. These are:

¹ In Canada, the internal responsibility system is the foundation that OHS legislation is built on. Everyone in the workplace is responsible, each according to their authority and control, to ensure a healthy and safe workplace. Because control and authority may not be shared equally at workplaces, responsibilities for health and safety may not be shared equally. In an internal responsibility system, employers are usually seen as having the most responsibilities, but all work site parties including workers have responsibilities

- musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive use, overexertion and heavy lifting;
- slips, trips and falls; and
- psychosocial hazards (i.e., workplace violence, harassment, and mental health).

Alberta Labour and Immigration re-validated these priority areas as part of this annual update by reviewing several data sources – including, cost and total number of claims made to the Workers’ Compensation Board – Alberta (WCB).

In addition, Alberta Labour and Immigration re-confirmed priority workforces that are known to be at higher risk of disease and injury by reviewing data sources. These are:

- small businesses – private sector employers who have less than 20 workers; and
- vulnerable workers – individuals who have one or more of the following characteristics: are young (aged 24 or less), are older (aged 55 or more), are Indigenous, have a short tenure (employed in temporary, seasonal or casual work contracts/arrangements - up to six months) of work, are seasonal workers, have multiple jobs, or are temporary foreign workers and/or migrants.

Analytic review, and validation among OHS system stakeholders confirmed these priority areas and workforce types were still relevant for Alberta’s OHS system. For additional background and data on these priority areas, see the [“Prevention Initiative for Alberta’s Occupational Health and Safety System”](#) document and the [“2019-20 Annual Update”](#) report.

The SSC and three working groups continued their work to improve prevention efforts through coordination and alignment within the OHS system.

Strategic steering committee

The SSC is chaired by Alberta Labour and Immigration. Members of this committee have a mandate to steward the implementation and integration of the Prevention Initiative and OHS system priorities.

The purpose of the SSC as outlined in the Terms of Reference are to:

- set the strategic vision and direction for the Prevention Initiative to improve the OHS system and advise on other system priorities as they arise;
- develop recommendations for, and facilitate implementation of, activities to support strategies related to the Prevention Initiative; and
- provide oversight of working groups established to develop actions for priorities identified within the Prevention Initiative.

Working groups

Three working groups have been created and are chaired by Alberta Labour and Immigration. Guided by the SSC, each working group has primary responsibility to develop recommendations and implement coordinated activities related to one of the three illness and injury priority areas. In addition, working groups will:

- define and frame issues and challenges for priorities areas and populations;
- undertake research and analysis to support development of programs and activities that advance the priority area and the Prevention Initiative;
- focus on identified key areas of focus within priority areas where common OHS system issues exist and highlight where issues may diverge;
- recommend and develop a range of options for coordinated actions among working group organizations;
- align activities to address gaps in OHS system;
- act upon opportunities for collaboration with OHS system stakeholders;
- leverage and promote resources among working group and other organizations to bring focused attention on the priority areas;
- ensure activities are measurable and achievable;
- champion solutions that extend beyond specific organizational focus that have a positive province-wide impact for all employers and workers on the OHS priority area; and
- assist Alberta Labour and Immigration in identification of new or emerging issues.

Initiative activities

Working group activities

The three working groups have continued work on the identified issues within each priority area and develop tactics to address issues related to high illness and injury rates.

A focus on improved prevention outcomes and development of a Prevention Initiative Logic Model has played a central role in planning. Working groups and the SSC needed a clear understanding of what they were trying to achieve and a way to measure progress. Through the development of the logic model, the working groups created plans and tactics that considered short, medium and long term outcomes and how tactics would build progress of the Prevention Initiative from one year to the next.

In the development of tactics, working groups considered and incorporated behaviour change theories and considered how those can be used to measure, evaluate and calibrate initiative efforts based on what is observed in the future. These elements include raised awareness, enhanced understanding and ability to take action. Working groups have considered how to create performance indicators for each component to ensure each is considered as part of larger behaviour change efforts required to prevent priority illness and injury areas (e.g. awareness, understanding and taking action).

Musculoskeletal disorders - campaign launch

In August 2021, OHS system stakeholders, through the musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) working group, were able to launch new resources that help increase awareness, raise understanding and take positive actions to prevent workplace MSDs. These resources address important issues identified by those on the front-lines that continue to make MSDs prevalent among workers.

The campaign resources are developed specifically for workers, supervisors and employers with an emphasis on small and medium businesses. The working group produced these resources for stakeholders to incorporate economical and straightforward workplace actions to prevent workplace MSDs and keep workers healthy, safe and on the job.

These resources included:

- a six part video tutorial to enhance understanding of how MSDs occur and how to take simple steps at the workplace to remove or control hazards;
- bulletins that explain actions workers and employers can take if MSD symptoms or injury occur;
- a poster that identifies common signs and symptoms of MSDs; and
- postcards that raise awareness about the importance of MSDs and where to find more credible information.

Working group members were encouraged to share information about the launch of the MSD campaign through their professional networks. Presentations to raise awareness about the campaign were provided to: the Canadian Association of Administrators of Labour Legislation – Occupational Health and Safety; Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety; Alberta's Certifying Partner members and; large Alberta employers. Additional steps taken included having

information appear in professional email notifications to health and safety, healthcare and other professional organizations:

- the Centre for Research Excellence in Musculoskeletal Disorders;
- regional and national level Associations of Canadian Ergonomists;
- the Alberta College of Occupational Therapists; and
- the College of Physiotherapists of Alberta.

Campaign resources have received thousands of views and requests have been made to use the information as part of employer OHS training programs.

Slips, trips, and falls – development of resources

The slips, trips and falls (STF) working group planned release of resources for spring 2021 – but was ultimately delayed due to stakeholder priorities around OHS information for COVID-19.

The working group used the opportunity to revisit the tactics and resource that had been planned prior to the pandemic to ensure they aligned with stakeholder needs and incorporated any new information that was deemed necessary. The planned tactics focus on reducing common workplace STF injuries such as falls from same level, working in seasonal conditions like with ice, snow, and rain, and bringing attention high-risk work situations such as working at heights, and precarious traction and footing conditions. The STF campaign plans to take coordinated efforts between OHS system partners to achieve better health and safety practices.

The campaign resources will include four videos and six bulletins and are anticipated to launch in May 2022. These resources will be developed with Alberta's OHS system stakeholders and address important issues identified by those on the front-lines that continue to make slips, trips, and falls prevalent. They are being developed specifically for workers, supervisors and employers with an emphasis on small and medium businesses. The working group has also focused to incorporate economical and straightforward workplace actions that can be taken to prevent workplace slips, trips, and falls - and keep workers healthy, safe and on the job.

Psychosocial hazards – development of resources

The psychosocial hazards (PSH) working group planned release of resources to be sequenced after the STF resources; however, these were delayed as working group members participated as their shifting priorities related to COVID-19 allowed. Despite these challenges, the working group delivered on actions required to plan and produce PSH resources, such as:

- discussing and deciding on the approach to PSH in the Alberta context that considers them in a similar way to physical hazards, who has responsibility for PSH in the workplace, what can be done about PSH, and barriers to addressing PSH in the workplace;
- creating a work plan outlining the key points to convey to audiences and what types of resources would best convey those points; and
- creating content for videos, bulletins, and multiple posters and postcards.

The campaign materials are being developed specifically for workers, supervisors and employers with an emphasis on small and medium businesses.

OHS inspections

OHS inspections supports the Prevention Initiative by increasing OHS officer awareness of hazards associated with the initiative's three priority areas and using inspections as an opportunity to provide stakeholder education and also take needed compliance actions. The Proactive Inspections Program provides support to high-risk sectors or employers.

Alberta OHS selects employers and sectors with relatively high injury and illness rates, high frequency of incidents or complaints of persistently low rates of compliance, and looks for emerging trends as well as how employers are responding to known priority issues.

The program aims to protect the health and safety of their workers by identifying and controlling hazards; enhancing awareness among employers and workers with respect to their relevant rights and responsibilities; and providing knowledge to vulnerable workers regarding their rights pertaining to occupational health and safety legislation.

From April 2020 to August 2021, the department conducted 5,077 proactive inspections, resulting in 3,181 orders being issued. Some proactive programs were paused in 2021 to provide a focus on pandemic response and have been extended for completion in 2022. A summary of actions is included in Table 1.

Service Sector

Identified industry sectors received work site inspections in the following sectors: Restaurant and Catering; Trucking Services; Food/Convenience Stores; and Hotels/Convention Centres. The inspections had a vulnerable worker focus as well as ensuring effective controls were in place to effectively address common workplace hazards.

Manufacturing, Processing and Packaging

Occupational health and safety carried out proactive inspections in the manufacturing, processing and packaging sector. The inspections focused on common hazards identified to the sector, and monitoring that work site parties had effective controls in place to eliminate, mitigate and control hazards.

Construction Sector

Occupational health and safety carried out proactive inspections in construction sectors. The program focused on specific sub-sector industries to address health and safety hazards associated with a diverse, high hazard industry.

Health Care

The inspections focused on the most common hazards for this sector, including musculoskeletal disorders, slips, trips and falls and psycho/social hazards including, but not limited to, violence and harassment in the workplace. In addition, occupational health and safety monitored work sites for controls against COVID-19.

Mining

The mining proactive inspections program uses an evidence-based approach intended to reduce injury and illness at Alberta mine sites by addressing high hazard activities. High hazard activities are identified through industry injury data and emerging industry trends.

Table 1 - Proactive inspections in Prevention Initiative priority areas

Initiative	Number of inspections	Time frame	Psycho-social hazards	Musculo-skeletal disorders	Slips, trips, falls	Small business	Vulnerable workers
Service Sector	484	Jan - Dec 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Manufacturing	1,301	Jan - Dec 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Construction	859	Jan - Dec 2021	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mining	80	Jan - Dec 2021	✓		✓	✓	✓
Healthcare	257	Jan - Dec 2021	✓	✓	✓		✓
2020 Essential Services Pandemic Focused Inspections	536	Apr – Mar 2021	✓		✓	✓	✓
2020 Meat Processing Pandemic Focused Inspections	106	Apr - Jul 2020	✓				✓
2019/2020 Health Care Program	1,029	Apr 2019 - Mar 2021	✓		✓		✓
2020 Hail Damage Residential Construction Focused Inspections	376	Jul - Sept 2020			✓		
2021 Exhibition and Fairs	49	Jul - Aug 2021			✓	✓	✓

Working through COVID-19

The world changed significantly in 2020 and Alberta's OHS system required agility to make the necessary adjustments to promote healthy and safe working conditions. The working groups, through the SSC, had re-examined each of the priority areas to ensure that resources developed

are meaningful and provide guidance for issues currently being experienced in Alberta's workplaces. Significant engagement for online hosting of the campaign was undertaken by the SSC. Many critical points were discussed in order to strategically consider viable options and to consider the needs of a broad range of OHS stakeholders.

The SSC has been agile in adapting to changes that have resulted since inception including those brought on by COVID-19. They have been quick to provide guidance and share perspectives among the committee and with government related to COVID-19 efforts. Meetings were productive and discussed the sudden shifts required to remain relevant to OHS system stakeholders.

It was and will continue to be necessary to provide timely responses to emerging needs of the OHS system, and the working groups and the SSC will maintain focus on the overall intent and the short-, medium- and long-term goals of this initiative.

The path forward

For 2021/2022, the Prevention Initiative will focus on achievable actions, and build off of the MSD and planned STF and PSH releases of campaign materials. Through the SSC, the working groups recommend creating a suite of resources for the upcoming year that will allow for a coordinated and aligned approach for each of the three priority areas. The suite of resources will give employers, workers, supervisors and those with interest in OHS accessible, effective and credible information that raises awareness, enhances understanding and stimulates the ability to take positive OHS actions to prevent illness and injury.

Based on the level of awareness, resources will be developed in order for audiences to take actions that will keep them healthy and safe. The resources will exist in a variety of formats to suit audience preferences. It is anticipated that in-person and hybrid engagements with system stakeholders will increase and the ability to provide presentations and in-person interactions will increase awareness and engagement for existing and future campaign resources.

By taking a user-centred approach, the working groups will seek feedback from intended audiences. To ensure this happens, evaluation will involve OHS system stakeholders who have existing connections to these audiences so those perspectives are shared and known.

Alberta OHS continues to plan proactive compliance monitoring around the priority areas of the Prevention Initiative. This will be an additional source of data for planning of future Prevention Initiative tactics.

Summary

For the past 16 months, the Prevention Initiative for Alberta's OHS System has re-confirmed and proceeded with known priority areas and focused on the most current evidence about effective ways to generate positive change to enhance prevention.

For 2021/2022, the Prevention Initiative will continue to collect data and develop information resources to support healthy and safe workplaces. The collection of data will occur through proactive compliance monitoring planned around Prevention Initiative priorities, WCB data and stakeholder engagement.

The past year has been one of engaged and creative conversations, learning, and beginning to understand the preferences and needs for information of the audiences that the initiative would like to reach and serve. The Prevention Initiative has adapted to rapid changes in 2020/21 to be responsive to OHS systems needs and will continue to be agile as it works strategically to achieve the goal of healthy and safe workplaces and workers.