

Prevention Initiative for Alberta's

Occupational Health and Safety System

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Prevention Initiative for Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety System

Every year, hardworking Albertans are killed or injured on the job. By taking actions before an event occurs, workplace illnesses and injuries can be prevented. This is the ultimate goal of the occupational health and safety (OHS) system – to keep workplaces and workers healthy and safe.

The OHS system includes employers, health and safety associations, labour organizations, service providers (consultants, trainers and auditors), the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), government, and workers, among others who all have a role to play in ensuring the system works as intended.

Additional support is required within the OHS system to focus on those issues that cause the greatest burden for illness and injury. By using evidence, we can focus actions, align resources, create linkages to communicate among system stakeholders, evaluate progress, and continuously improve OHS efforts to more systematically achieve our goals.

The purpose of this initiative is to raise awareness of disease and injury areas, where workers are most affected and/or have the greatest risk, so that Alberta's OHS system can focus on the highest value areas to improve the health and safety of workers. By articulating priorities for the entire OHS system, it highlights the areas where all players, whether employers, health and safety associations, labour organizations, government, or the WCB, need to align efforts to bring about change.

This initiative will clarify the priorities of the OHS system based on evidence and consultation. It supports the use of best practices for an effective OHS system, including forging and maintaining strong partnerships, developing positive health and safety culture, education and increasing awareness to address these priorities. It will prioritize cooperation between all levels of the OHS system to work collaboratively. Albertans can expect to receive regular feedback on progress of actions taken as a result of this initiative.

By taking stock of the successes and challenges we have had, and learning from our experiences, we can make Alberta a leader in occupational illness and injury prevention.

System Priorities

Alberta Labour identified three occupational health and safety (OHS) areas that require attention to improve the health and safety of workers in Alberta.

The priority injuries and diseases are:

- 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).

These priorities were identified by reviewing several data sources including WCB claims, by both cost and total number of claims (Appendix 1). These priority diseases and injuries occur in all industries across Alberta.

In addition to these, priority workforces have been identified that are known to be at higher risk of disease and injury. The priority workforce types 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 6 months) of work, are seasonal workers, have multiple jobs, or are temporary foreign workers, and/or migrants.

Why these priorities?

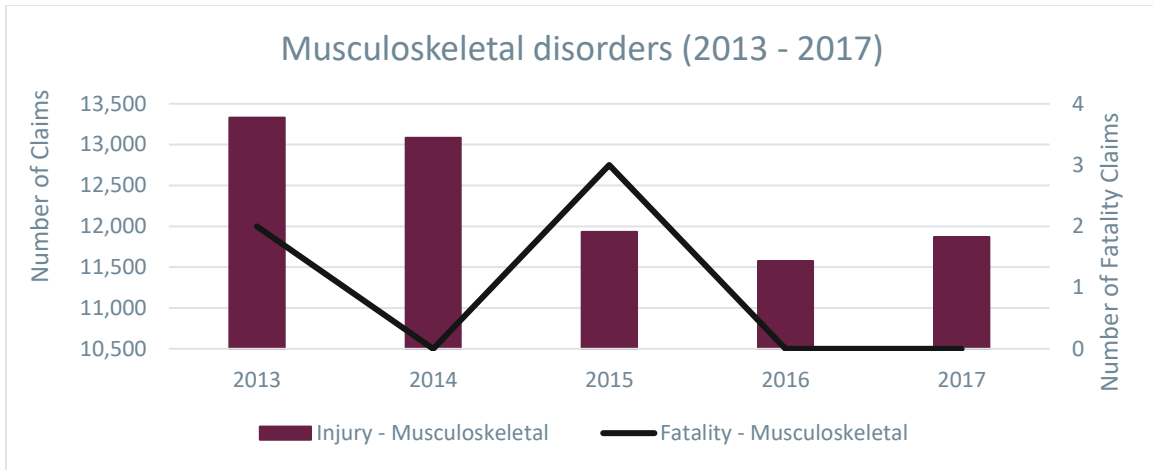
The goal of the prevention initiative is to continuously monitor and highlight areas where workers are most affected and/or have the greatest risk and to allow the OHS system, as a whole, to work in a collaborative manner to address these. The desired outcome of aligning the OHS system to these priority areas and workforces is to have a measurable influence on them.

Musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive use, overexertion and heavy lifting

In 2017, this category was the most common cause for both lost-time and disabling injury claims in Alberta, and accounted for 41.0 per cent of the lost-time claims and 45.3 per cent of the disabling injury claims (Alberta Labour, 2018).

Ergonomic factors, such as repetitive use, overuse, and improper lifting of heavy objects significantly contribute to musculoskeletal disorders such as sprains, strains and overexertion injuries. These factors are major risks for conditions such as tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, hernias and lower back pain.

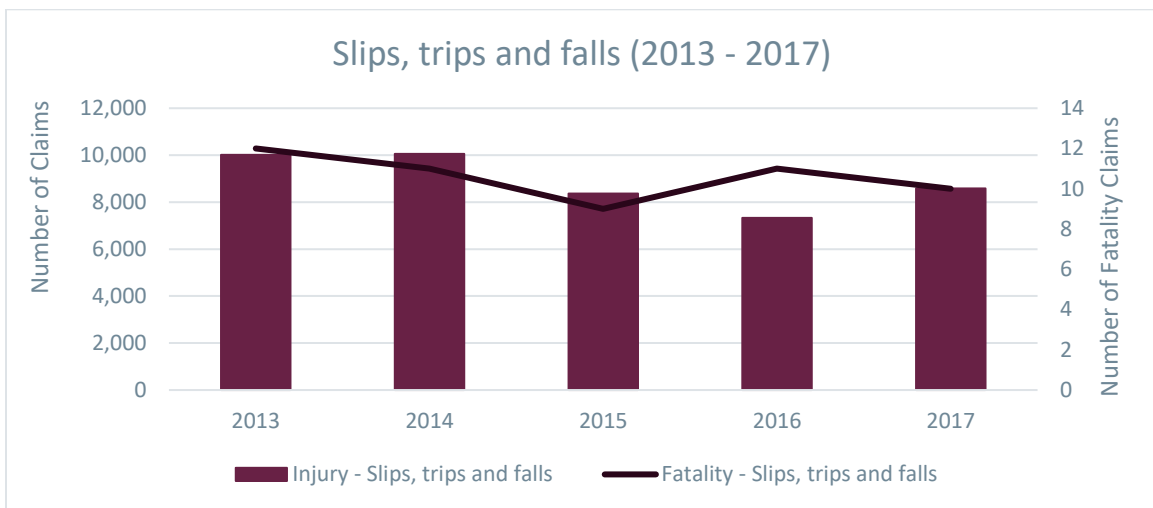
Figure 1.¹



Slips, trips and falls

Each year, thousands of workers report injuries to WCB related to slips, trips and falls. These injury mechanisms account for 39.0 per cent of the cost for the top 20 non-fatal injuries reported to WCB². They include falls from ladder; non-moving vehicle; fall to lower level; slipping on something-without falling; and fall down stairs/steps.

Figure 2.²



¹ Musculoskeletal disorders due to repetitive use, overexertion and heavy lifting

² Data from Workers' Compensation Board-Alberta (WCB) 2017 Annual Claim Data

Psychosocial hazards (mental health and workplace violence and harassment)

Mental health disorders were the second most common diseases from the latest five-year WCB claims data (12 per cent) and comprised 30 per cent of the top 20 when sorted by total claim cost (from 2013-2017). Over the last five years, claims have grown within this category in a steady upward trend. WCB claims for this category include post-traumatic stress, anxiety and other syndromes (Alberta Labour, 2018).

On average, recovery from psychological injury claims takes nearly two and a half times longer compared with the overall average for all lost-time injuries.

The new OHS laws enhanced protections for Alberta workers from psychological hazards. This includes exposure to violence and harassment. Workplace violence and harassment has a consistent association with reduced mental health. It influences morale, absenteeism and turnover, which can contribute to a hostile work environment that may enable further workplace violence and harassment (Araujo S. &, 2011) (Verkuil, Atasayi, & Molendijk, 2015).

Some occupations are at greater risk of workplace violence and may create situations that increase worker vulnerability.

Figure 3.³



³ Data from Workers' Compensation Board-Alberta (WCB) 2017 Annual Claim Data

Small businesses⁴

Small businesses in Alberta are responsible for 35 per cent of all private sector employment in the province and make up 95 per cent of all business in the province (Entrepreneurship and Regional Development Branch 2014). Approximately half (51 per cent) of all small businesses in Alberta operate in construction; professional, scientific and technical services⁵; and retail and wholesale trade (Entrepreneurship and Regional Development Branch, 2014).

Small employers have many business responsibilities and often limited time and resources for health and safety program development. Small business owners are often not aware of their OHS responsibilities and do not know where to seek information to assist them with understanding their obligations.

Vulnerable workers

Vulnerable workers are 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 6 months) of work, are seasonal workers, have multiple jobs, or are temporary foreign workers, and/or migrants.

Workers who are 55 years or older were the largest group who had fatal workplace injuries (66 per cent)⁶. In contrast, young workers (15 to 24 years old) are often overrepresented in sectors associated with high OHS risks and have higher rates of non-fatal injuries. Young workers had the highest disabling injury frequency rate in 2017. From 2013-2017, there were 34 workplace fatalities of workers aged less than 25 years⁶. Workers with short tenure are at a high risk for occupational disease and injury, accounting for 24 per cent of all injuries. Workers who are both young workers and have a short tenure are expected to have a high risk of disease and injury due to inexperience, lack of training, exposure to more dangerous jobs and hesitancy to ask questions (WorkSafeBC, 2018) (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2011).

Alberta's OHS system

In Canada, the internal responsibility system (IRS) is the foundation that OHS legislation is built on. Everyone in the workplace is responsible, each according to their authority and control, to

⁴ Small business is defined here as employers with less than 20 workers.

⁵ North American Industry Classification System identifies professional, scientific and technical services as establishments primarily engaged in activities in which human capital is the major input. Industries grouped in this sector have production processes that are almost wholly dependent on worker skills. (Statistics Canada, 2018)

⁶ Data from Workers' Compensation Board-Alberta (WCB) 2017 Annual Claim Data

ensure a healthy and safe workplace. Due to the degree of control they have over work sites, employers have the greatest degree of responsibility. However, all workers must ensure their own health and safety and the health and safety of those around them.

The IRS is supported by structures such as health and safety committees and health and safety representatives that serve as an internal monitor and forum for shared problem solving for OHS hazards and issues. Together, worker and employer representatives identify and address OHS issues for the benefit of all those who are on the work site. Each party must rely on the other to ensure they are accountable to their role, according to their degree of responsibility.

Externally, the IRS is monitored by government that enforces compliance with legislation, supports OHS committees or representatives, and inspects workplaces. Health and safety associations, employers and labour organizations also provide training to build OHS competencies. Legislation and enforcement are not the only ways to improve OHS outcomes and so the system requires many players to come to the table. An OHS system that has players who consider the needs and priorities of the entire system, and utilize formal and informal channels of communication, has the ability to have significant positive influence on the lives and working conditions of workers.

There are many other prevention activities that contribute to reducing illness and injury and building a positive health and safety culture. Increasing alignment between stakeholder efforts is required to understand the approaches, such as education methods and public awareness, that work well for maximizing outcomes. Bringing our system players together and creating the conditions that allow for alignment are necessary to address our current state.

Principles for carrying out the prevention initiative

The principles are based on best practices for effective OHS systems. Priority areas have been selected based on data from a variety of sources to be the areas with the greatest need and/or highest value. These areas have been consistent over the recent past.

The foundation principles for the initiative are:

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

While the actions taken by each of the stakeholders within the OHS system to address priority areas may be different, the cumulative result should create a noticeable impression on OHS performance.

Stakeholders

To create alignment of efforts, identification of stakeholders in the OHS system is required.

Primary stakeholders:

- Government of Alberta - Alberta Labour
- Health and safety associations
- Labour organizations and unions
- Workers' Compensation Board

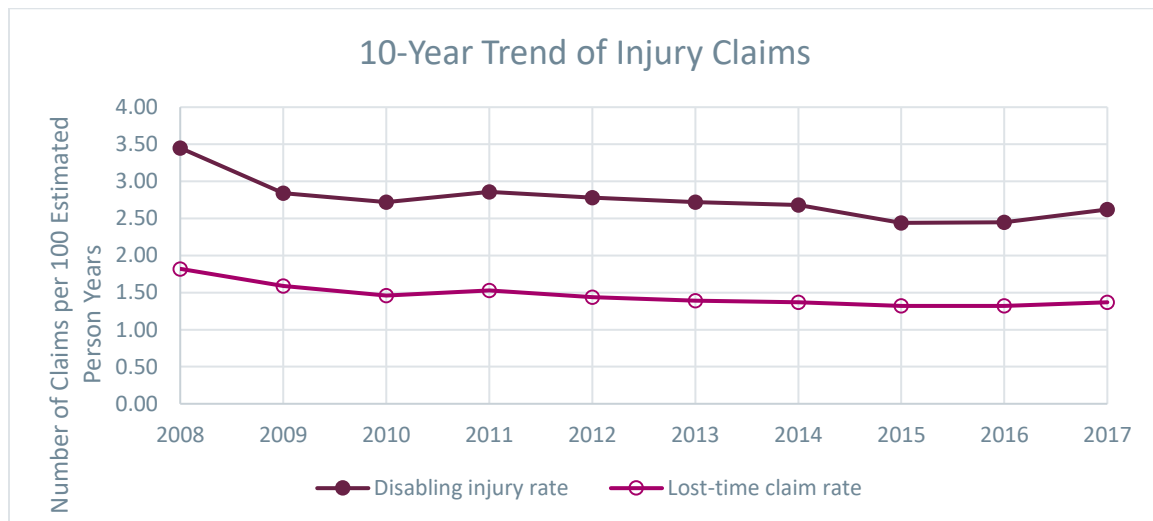
Secondary stakeholders:

- Workers
- Employers
- OHS auditors and training providers
- Other ministries and levels of government
- Business and industry associations
- Research organizations
- Non-governmental organizations
- Private occupational health and safety service providers
- Educational organizations

Current State

The previous work of OHS system stakeholders made a large positive effect on OHS performance. However, over time, the rates of injury claims have remained consistent. A refocused approach is required to continue to improve performance and outcomes.

Figure 4⁷.



Alberta has implemented many initiatives in line with Canadian best practices that contributed to decreases in WCB lost-time and disabling injury claims.

- Two grant funding programs designed to build positive health and safety culture have been implemented – OHS Futures provides health and safety research funding and Innovation and Engagement grants are aimed at improving OHS awareness, knowledge and action.
- The Partnerships in Injury Reduction (PIR) program is a certification program to establish health and safety management systems.
- Alberta Labour, health and safety associations and other system stakeholders deliver education and training products for a variety of topics and formats that consider unique audience needs of workers and employers.
- Alberta Labour conducts enforcement of compliance with OHS legislation by proactively inspecting high-risk industries identified by compliance and injury data.
- Publishing data on enforcement activities and injury statistics to raise awareness among researchers, employers and workers.

⁷ Data from WCB 2017 Annual Claim Data

- Public awareness campaigns are created to encourage Albertans to improve their knowledge and learn more about labour rules, including print publications, e-learning programs, web-based awareness sessions, access to a call centre for additional information (OHS Contact Centre)
- Alberta has recently reviewed and updated OHS legislation to come into line with the Canadian mainstream and has clarified work site party responsibilities, and taken actions to improve worker engagement in OHS.

The Path Forward

System Alignment

OHS system alignment will be facilitated through the education of OHS system partners, the sharing and disseminating of information on the current state of the system, and the progress on the priority areas through business planning and annual reporting.

Through ongoing engagement sessions, Alberta Labour will continue to work to gain buy-in and encourage all OHS system partners to share the vision of OHS in the province to encourage all parties to work towards the same goals.

Additional officers will be recruited to better represent the monitoring and compliance activities of Alberta Labour throughout the province. Officers also play a role in the education and awareness activities related to OHS in their interactions with work sites. Enforcement will be further supported through IT system updates, which will ease the data recording processes of officers in the field, allow for facilitation of better resource allocation, and support data mining activities. This increase in quality of information will assist in the monitoring and evaluation of progress towards reducing claims related to the priority areas.

Grant programs offered through Alberta Labour, and other ministries that overlap with the themes of OHS, will work to build awareness and provide evidence related to the priority areas and/or workforce types.

Prevention Process and Measuring Progress

Emerging issues and/or areas within the priorities that require additional focus will be identified annually through a data review by Alberta Labour, including data from: internal data sources, WCB, and health and safety associations. All decisions about future direction or activities within the initiative will be supported by evidence.

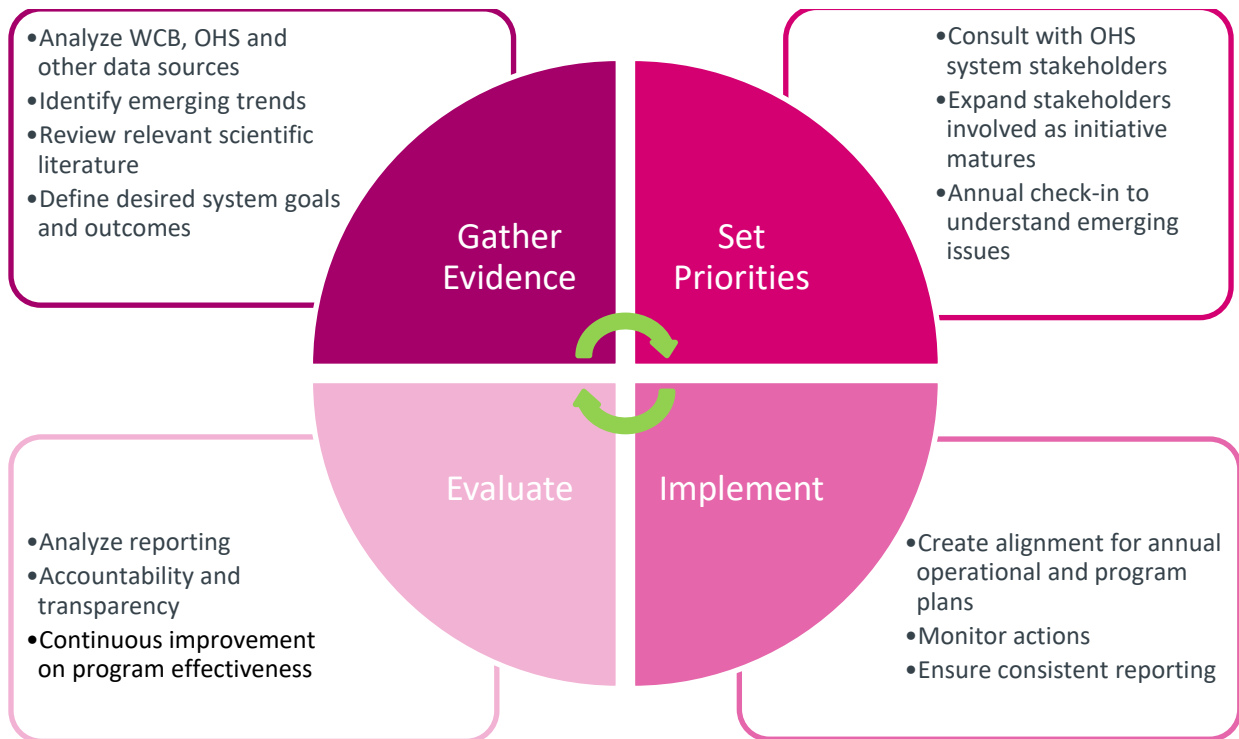
The priority areas will be re-evaluated to ensure they continue to address the areas of greatest effect to workers as well as to the OHS system. Building evaluation into implementation plans will enable measurement of the effect on the OHS system.

Health and safety associations will report their activities that align with the priority areas and the metrics that will be used to evaluate their success and effect.

The data will be evaluated annually by Alberta Labour to measure the value of programs and work accomplished against the system priorities. Examples include:

- Injury, disease, and fatality statistics by priority area and population
- Quantify the economic value of the changes to the WCB claim rates
- Quantify the improved workplace health and safety outcomes for workers
- Quantify enforcement, awareness, educational and training activities
- Quantify applicability of services and engagement within specific industries
- Quantify collaboration between various OHS system players (e.g. health and safety associations, government, employers, workers)

Annual reports will contain information about what projects are underway to have an influence on the priority areas and will include performance metrics.



Summary

While Alberta workplaces have consistently focused on occupational health and safety and the needs of workers, there is room for improvement.

Through focusing on the most current evidence and using effective methods to generate positive change, this initiative will have an effect on claim and injury rates of workers in Alberta leading to an improved culture of health and safety that has benefits extend beyond the workplace.

Continuous monitoring of data and communication between stakeholders from within the OHS system will allow for: sharing of strategies, tools and implementation methods that have success, the ability to have system wide focus on an area that is showing challenges, and the ability for stakeholders to raise concerns and to request information with greater ease through the development of more partnerships.

The OHS system will work together to keep workplaces and workers healthy and safe.

Prevention Initiative for Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety System - Appendices

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Appendix 1 - Sources of Data

These data sources were analyzed to identify OHS priority areas based on their effect on the lives of Albertan workers, primarily focusing on frequency of occurrence and financial value:

- Workers' Compensation Board claim data
- Potentially Serious Incident Reporting System data
- Statistics Canada Labour Force Characteristics and Employment by Industry
- Entrepreneurship and Regional Development Branch- Small Business, Big Impact: Alberta Small Business Profile
- Alberta Treasury Board and Finance Population Projection
- Current and future OHS issues/themes identified through consultation to determine research priorities for the 2018 OHS Futures grant funding program cycle
- Jurisdictional scan of OHS priorities reported by other Canadian and International jurisdictions
- Academic research papers

Appendix 2 - Annual Timelines

Task	Annual timeline	Alberta Labour	Other system stakeholders
Gather evidence	July – August	propose priorities and emerging trends	review priorities
Identify emerging trends	September – November	engage stakeholders	validate emerging trend
Set and/or validate priorities	September – November	engage stakeholders	confirm priorities
Share	January – March	disseminate priorities	integrate into planning
Implement	April – December	carry out actions	carry out actions
Evaluate	April – June	integrate into planning	share data
Report	Summer	produce report	integrate into planning