



OSHA Looks At Long Term Care Staff Safety

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The obesity epidemic in the United States may be responsible for the emergence of a new trend in long term care staffing, and it appears to be spurring the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) into action.

Obesity is linked to numerous other health problems, which, unsurprisingly, often result in such individuals seeking treatment in health care facilities. As an increasing number of overweight Americans enter nursing homes and other long term care settings, employers will be faced with addressing the growing number of workplace injuries related to resident handling.

In November 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that injuries to employees in nursing homes and other health care facilities were on the rise. According to the data, the number of injuries increased 6 percent for health care support employees in general, a rate that is nearly 2.5 times the rate for all private and public workers. The injury rate for nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants rose 7 percent. Perhaps most notably, the rate of musculoskeletal injuries (which includes back injuries) increased 10 percent for these employee groups.

In response to this trend, OSHA launched in April a three-year National Emphasis Program (NEP) for Nursing and Residential Care Facilities. The program covers the following provider categories: nursing homes, residential facilities for individuals with developmental disabilities, and continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs). Businesses such as assisted living facilities without on-site nursing facilities will not be affected by the NEP.

The purpose of the NEP is to reduce the unusually high rate of injury and illness among employees in the nursing home and long term care industries. In support of the NEP, OSHA compared the days away, restrictions, and transfers, or DART, rate for nursing homes and CCRCs against the DART rate for all private industry.

OSHA plans to inspect facilities that have a DART rate at or above 10. This means that OSHA could inspect any nursing home or CCRC that has 10 or more employees who missed at least one day of work because of injury or illness sustained at work during a one-year period.

Employers should take necessary measures to minimize or mitigate resident handling injuries by also conducting an audit of existing safety training programs, resident handling policies and

procedures, and related recordkeeping practices. A modest investment of time and resources now will pay dividends if an OSHA inspector comes calling in the future.

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Ted Boehm
Partner
404.240.4286
[Email](#)