

2003 News Releases

Release: Immediate
Contact: Dolores Quesenberry
Date: Jan. 14, 2003
Phone: 919-733-0349

Labor Commissioner Gets High Marks from Construction Group

Labor Commissioner Cherie K. Berry, who has pushed hard to expand free educational programs on workplace safety, received earlier this month a construction group's highest award for her efforts on behalf of employee safety.

Berry, the first woman elected as North Carolina's labor commissioner, received the Pinnacle Award from the Carolinas Associated General Contractors for 2002.

"Commissioner Berry has presented an open-door policy that's enabled us to build a strong working relationship with the Department of Labor," said Chip Murray, safety director for the group. "The commissioner and the labor department are really working hard on behalf of employee safety."

Carolinas AGC presents annually a special award to an individual outside the construction industry whose efforts have contributed to the state's economy. The award to Berry also recognizes her efforts to work with the construction industry to promote workers' safety.

"I am so very honored to be recognized by Carolinas AGC," Berry said. "Their commitment to promoting workplace safety in the construction industry and their willingness to work with the Department of Labor to eliminate workplace fatalities has been one of the highlights of my administration."

The Pinnacle Award will be officially announced Jan. 18 at the Carolinas AGC annual conference in Palm Beach, Fla.

Last December, Commissioner Berry introduced the country's first mobile training unit, Labor One. The mobile classroom provides safety training in Spanish and English to help reduce workplace fatalities. The latest fatality figures dropped from 234 in 2000 to 203 in 2001. The drop in fatalities is attributed in part to the department's aggressive efforts to provide safety training and free consultative services throughout North Carolina.

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Contact: Dolores Quesenberry
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Jobs Look Bright in Overlooked Trade

N.C. Department of Labor officials are making efforts to heighten interest in a career path — boilers and pressure vessels — that appears to draw little interest from today's young workers despite the good pay.

Together with the insurance industry, the labor department is starting the country's first apprenticeship program to attract high school graduates to well-paying jobs in the pressure equipment industry.

"This is a good career opportunity for someone interested in learning more about boilers and pressure vessels and how we go about inspecting them," Commissioner Cherie K. Berry said. "These are good jobs and they pay well."

The curriculum combines three years of classroom work with practical experience in field inspections of pressure vessels and boilers. Apprentices completing the program will earn an associate degree in engineering. Apprentices then can choose to begin working as full-time employees with the labor department as certified inspectors or seek employment in the insurance industry.

The average pay for a full-time inspector is about \$42,000 per year.

Labor officials are expecting a shortage of qualified boiler and pressure vessel inspectors as a large number of current inspectors reach retirement age. There are approximately 220 inspectors in North Carolina. State labor officials expect the number to drop 30 percent by 2004. There are currently only 4,000 qualified inspectors worldwide and officials expect the number to drop to 3,500 within three to five years.

There are 95,000 registered pressure vessels in the state. Of these, about 45,000 fall under the jurisdiction of the labor department. The insurance industry inspects the remainder.

Qualified candidates interested in applying for the program may do so through our website, www.nclabor.com or by calling 1-800-NCLABOR.

The program has been approved by the U.S. Department of Labor and the state labor department's Apprenticeship Bureau.

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Contact: Juan Santos or Dolores Quesenberry
Date: March 5, 2003
Phone: 919-733-2355

Labor, Construction Industry Try Curbing Work Fatalities

N.C. Department of Labor officials for the first time in recent memory are holding regional meetings with construction industry leaders to attempt to stem fatalities in what is some of the most dangerous work in the private sector.

The meetings in Goldsboro and Dallas, N.C., near Charlotte, are unprecedented in the effort to fight a stubborn problem that has dogged the construction industry for years and in 2001 claimed 51 lives.

"Almost across the board, fatality figures show dramatic improvement, dropping to 203 from 234," Labor Commissioner Cherie K. Berry said. "Construction stood out because fatalities rose from 45 to 51. We can do better than that."

State and industry experts at the forums will identify trends in the construction accidents that are most likely to represent lethal dangers.

Berry, who pushed for the regional meetings, said construction workers would benefit from a joint effort by their companies and labor officials to target fatal trends at work sites.

The forums are being held in eastern and western North Carolina to make it easier for employees to attend at a time of year when construction work begins to pick up steam.

The Goldsboro meeting is at Wayne Community College beginning at 9 a.m. on Thursday, March 6. The Dallas meeting is at Gaston Community College, beginning at 9 a.m. on March 19.

Berry has intensified department efforts to provide free consultative services and free training to employers and employees to help fight workplace fatalities. The forums in Goldsboro and Dallas are free.

The latest labor department figures show that the drop to 203 in fatalities in 2001 from a high of 234 in 2000 was the single biggest drop since 1995.

"We can see we're making progress," Berry said. "We just need to make sure we extend this awareness to every construction site in the state. These forums are a part of that effort."

For additional information, call (919)807-2875 or visit the N.C. Department of Labor's Web site at www.nclabor.com.

Release: Immediate
Contact: Dolores Quesenberry
Date: September 18, 2003
Phone: 919-733-0348
MEDIA ADVISORY

The N.C. Department of Labor starting in September will host a series of low-cost wage and hour seminars across the state in an attempt to attract small businesses. The seminars are being held in Greenville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Cary and Asheville.

"This is an opportunity for small business owners and their representatives to learn more about the complicated wage and hour laws in North Carolina," said Henry Sasser, deputy administrator for the labor department's Wage and Hour Bureau. "We are trying to offer small businesses an alternative to the high priced seminars that are out there."

Both state and federal wage and hour officials will conduct the seminars. The officials will be available to answer questions and concerns.

Some of the topics that will be discussed include employer/employee relationships, record keeping, minimum wage, time and one-half overtime pay, promised wages, wage benefits, youth employment/child labor including work permits and hours worked.

The registration fee is \$25.00. A reference guide notebook containing examples, fact sheets and other valuable information will be provided to each participant.

This is a combined effort of the labor department's Wage and Hour Bureau, the federal Wage and Hour Division and the Small Business Centers in selected community colleges.

For more information about the seminars or to register, call the Wage and Hour Bureau in Raleigh at (919) 807-2796 or call toll free (N.C. only) at 1-800-NC-LABOR. Registration forms are available online at www.nclabor.com/wh/seminar_regist.pdf.

Release: Immediate
Contact: Heather Crews
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North Carolina Workplaces Much Safer for Working Men, Women

Working men and women in North Carolina have reached a new level of work safety unprecedented in recent state history, with workplace injuries and illnesses in the private sector dropping to an all-time low.

Injury figures released Thursday by the N.C. Department of Labor and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show injuries and illnesses dropped to a rate of 4.0 injured workers for every 100 full-time employees in North Carolina in 2002.

In 1992, the rate stood at an all-time high of 8.6 workers.

Coupled with fatalities that have plummeted by 28 percent in the last three years, the new injury figures prompted state labor officials to express hope that initiatives aimed at promoting workplace safety were taking effect.

"It took a minute or two for the numbers to sink in when I first got them," N.C. Labor Commissioner Cherie Berry said. "I have mixed emotions about it though. First of all, I don't want anyone getting hurt on the job. On the other hand, the numbers are impressive."

Although the federal government made some reporting changes that it said could affect injury survey results, state labor officials said the changes do not distort the picture of how injuries and illnesses are dropping sharply in North Carolina.

"Some of the changes have no bearing on actual work injuries," Berry said. "People hurt while doing personal errands on their own time can't report that as a work injury. Colds don't count as work illnesses. Car accidents while going home in the evening don't count as injuries. The rule changes just make it clearer about what is a work accident or illness."

Berry said a drop in injuries is attributable to a number of factors.

"We're seeing a new day in North Carolina," Berry said. "The labor department is doing a good job, but we're also seeing employers put in some really, really good safety programs. You see these great programs in Asheville, Gastonia, Boone, Wilmington, everywhere in N.C. We are witnessing a major change."

In 2001, the rate dropped to 4.8 workers following a 5.3 rate in 2000.

"The low injury and illness rate and the reduction in fatalities do prove that government and business can work hand-in-hand to improve worker safety," Berry said.

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Contact: Dolores Quesenberry
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Phone: 919-733-0348

MEDIA ADVISORY

Raleigh—N.C. Labor Department officials recently released voluntary ergonomic guidelines that will protect furniture industry workers from repetitive motion injuries.

The labor department worked with the American Furniture Manufacturers Association, U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Ergonomics Center of North Carolina, and Ergonomics Laboratory at N.C. State University to develop the voluntary guidelines. The ergonomic effort is the first time federal and state governments have worked with private industry to develop voluntary ergonomic guidelines that meet their own specific needs.

“The guidelines demonstrate what industry and government can accomplish when working together,” N.C. Labor Commissioner Cherie K. Berry said. “The American Furniture Manufacturers Association has risen to the challenge to help create safer, more productive workplaces.”

The document explains basic ergonomic principles and outlines a variety of measures proven successful in protecting workers involved in furniture manufacturing.

Berry in 2001 rescinded an ergonomics standard that she said was cumbersome and incomprehensible. Berry said the regulations—more than 600 pages long—would not reduce ergonomics-related injuries and could potentially put companies and their employees out of work.

Labor department officials said there are certain industries in the state that experience ergonomic-related injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. They said the key to reducing those types of injuries is to identify the sectors with those problems. The next step is to prepare guidelines that effectively reduce the injuries instead of creating massive regulations that are then indiscriminately applied to all employers and employees.

Besides the printed guidelines, labor department officials also are making available compact discs with the information in electronic form. The printed guidelines and the compact discs are free. They can be obtained by contacting the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Education, Training and Technical Assistance at 919-807-2875 or by sending facsimiles to 919-807-2876.

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Workplace Fatalities See Big Drop

RALEIGH-Figures released by state officials Friday show that 169 workers in North Carolina died in workplace accidents in 2002, the lowest total since detailed recordkeeping began in 1992.

According to 2002 figures released by the N.C. Department of Labor and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, fatalities in North Carolina dropped for the second year in a row, following 203 workplace deaths in 2001.

"We believe the last two years show the single biggest improvement in the history of workplace safety in the state," said N.C. Labor Commissioner Cherie Berry. "We've worked extremely hard to bring a new level of safety for the people of this state, and we're seeing the results."

The 169 fatalities matched the low achieved in 1992, when the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries report was begun by the federal government that year.

Fatal work accidents hit an all-time high of 234 in 2000, the year before Berry assumed office as the first woman elected to the statewide post of labor commissioner.

The fatality figure took a major plunge in her first year in office after she pushed for an increase in safety training and free consultative services for employers seeking to protect their workers.

From a high of 234 in 2000, fatalities dropped to 203 in 2001.

The latest drop to 169 reflects a reduction of about 17 percent from 2001. Combined with the 2001 decline, work fatalities in the state have dropped nearly 28 percent in two years.

"We're encouraged but far from happy," said Allen McNeely, director of Occupational Safety and Health Division for the Labor Department. "The latest numbers are all good indicators. They show we're obviously doing the right things to cut back on fatalities. I just want us to do more of those good things, and we will."

In 1992, when the federal government began to keep detailed accounts on workplace fatalities, the state's workforce numbered 3.1 million. Today the workforce totals about 3.9 million.

The latest information shows that fatalities in the state's robust construction industry-long a worry for labor officials-dropped to 44 from 51 the year before. In transportation-related accidents, fatalities dropped to 76 from a high of 93 the year before.

In manufacturing, fatalities stayed at 24, the same number as the year before.

Of the total number of fatalities, 159 were men and 10 were women. There were 112 fatalities involving non-Hispanic whites, 28 non-Hispanic blacks and 25 Hispanics. The remaining four fatalities were not identified by race.

Berry said some of the drop in fatalities can be attributed to special emphasis programs that target specific problem areas throughout the state. Berry also credited employers and employee groups for implementing safety programs that have reduced other work hazards.

"We've emphasized from day one a willingness to work with employers to protect their workers," Berry said. "We wanted an approach that would yield real results. I'd say a drop from 234 fatalities to 169 is a real drop, wouldn't you?"

In 2000, 35 counties in the state had four or more work fatalities. That number dropped to 28 in 2001. According to the latest figures, the number of counties with four or more fatalities has dropped to nine.

Wake County's fatalities rose significantly last year, bucking the trend seen elsewhere. Wake led all counties with 19 fatalities, compared to 6 the year before. Mecklenburg County, which usually leads the state in workplace deaths, dropped to 15 from 18 the year before. Guilford County was third with 10 fatalities, compared to 11 the year before.

Berry said Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford and a few other counties already have been picked to receive added emphasis in the coming months. Berry said the Labor Department will schedule training sessions in those counties and will make a mobile classroom available to provide training in various areas.

Figures for other counties include:

Forsyth - 6

Cumberland - 5

Bladen - 4

Dare - 4

Duplin - 4

Durham - 4

No other county in the state had four or more fatalities.