



Is Workplace Safety a Casualty of Distrust in Government?

BY DAVID DANIELS

It is probably not a surprise given current events that public trust in government remains at all-time lows. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center (2017),¹ trust in the government of the United States reached its peak on October 15, 1964 at 77%.

Currently, trust in government is at 20% and is even lower for certain demographics depending on whether their respective political ideology is occupying the White House. While distrust for government has several consequences, one might wonder if safety in the public workplace is not one of them.

By every measure, the public-sector workplace is less safe than the private sector workplace. In 2015, rates of injury to public sector workers were 86% higher than rates in the private sector (U.S. Bureaus of Labor Statistics, 2016).² Though there are obviously many contributing factors to these statistics, it is difficult to argue that a serious concern for workplace safety, other than the financial implications, is a significant priority in many public-sector organizations by either managers or workers. Another contributor is the fact that regardless of whether a government organization is covered by federal OSHA or a state plan, few assign the oversight of safety to anyone specifically, and virtually none assign the responsibility at a level in the organization with the authority to make the significant changes that are necessary where significant safety problems exist.

While the size, cost and effectiveness of government is a favorite refrain of particularly those seeking elective office, rarely is the effect of an unsafe government workplace a part of the conversation. Unlike the private sector, when a government employee is injured, the costs are ultimately passed along to its





customers both directly through taxes, fees and other costs and indirectly through the effectiveness of (or lack thereof) the government itself. The injured worker at a private business where an individual doesn't shop is not the same as an injured firefighter or police officer who cannot work their shift, resulting in overtime to fill the vacant position.

The question could and should be asked, what about the safety of teachers, transit operators, and refuse collectors who provide the services that most municipalities are expected to provide? Who is paying

attention to the safety of the bailiffs, public health nurses, and voter registration officials that are often expected to work extremely long hours to ensure that residents can exercise their constitutional rights in counties across the country?

Just because government may be too big or too small, too intrusive or ineffective, does not mean that the safety of workers in government is any less important. However, the lack of focus and resources towards safety suggests that public-sector employees and the public themselves may be casualties of the lack of trust in public institutions themselves.

¹ Pew Research Foundation. (2017, May 3). Public trust in government: 1958 – 2017. Retrieved July 16, 2017 from <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/>

² U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016, October 27). Employer-Reported Workplace Injury and Illness Summary. Retrieved July 17, 2017 from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/osh.nr0.htm>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

David Daniels has been a public-sector safety professional for over 25 years. He is certified as a Safety Administrator, Violence Prevention Specialist, Safety and Health Specialist and Fire Service Health and Safety Officer; as well as a Chief Fire Officer designee. He holds a Master's Degree in Human Resources Management, and completed the Senior Executives in State and Local Government program at Harvard University.

Daniels is a member of the Board of Delegates of the National Safety Council (NSC) and chair of the NSC's Government and Public-Sector Division. He serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Safety, Health, and Survival Section. He is also a member of the International Association of Safety Professionals and the World Future Society. Daniels speaks both nationally and internationally on a variety of subjects including occupational safety, organizational culture, human resource management and leadership.



Want to submit an article? Find out how at:
nsc.org/publiceyeonsafety

NSC Government & Public Sector Division is comprised of leading professionals and subject matter experts in this field. Thanks to these authorities, the National Safety Council can further its mission of eliminating preventable deaths at work, in homes and communities, and on the road. To learn more or join an NSC Division, visit nsc.org/divisions.

900012496 0917 ©2017 National Safety Council