

The Politics of Heat Stress Safety

By: Robert Lahey, Chicagoland Construction Safety Council



In recent months, there has been an ironic combination of action and inaction related to consideration of a comprehensive heat stress safety standard – both at the federal and state levels. While this matter continues to receive attention within the highest tiers of government, the status quo remains intact.

Currently, the National Emphasis Program announced in 2022 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) remains in effect. Its purpose is to protect employees from heat-related hazards and resulting injuries in outdoor and indoor workplaces. The Program sets forth a targeted enforcement component and reiterates the agency's compliance assistance and outreach efforts. The primary goal is to encourage early interventions by employers that will prevent illnesses and deaths among workers during high-heat conditions by instituting water, rest, shade, training, and acclimatization procedures for new and returning employees.

In August 2024, OSHA published a formal rulemaking notice for Heat Injury and Illness Prevention. This was widely regarded as a significant step toward development of the first-ever standard intended to protect workers from heat hazards. A public comment period followed, during which written submissions were received until January 2025.

Most recently, OSHA convened a public hearing that included in-person testimony from dozens of stakeholders who advocated for – and against – a national standard that would be applicable to all employers in the general industry, construction, maritime, and agriculture sectors. Passionate feedback was received in response to the requirement for businesses to create a plan to evaluate and control risks in their workplaces. These proceedings adjourned on July 2nd, after twelve days of testimony, although the opportunity for post-hearing comments remains open until September 30th. Thus, the lawmaking process continues.

Despite this flurry of activity in Washington, DC, the legislative landscape in Springfield, Illinois was paradoxically quiet. In the absence of a federal rule, lawmakers put forth the Workplace Extreme Temperature Safety Act, which proposed that the Illinois Department of Labor adopt rules to establish excessive heat/cold standards and an occupational temperature-related illness and injury prevention plan. Furthermore, the Act would require employers to develop and make available on an annual basis a site-specific written safety plan based on meaningful input from employees.

Although the legislation was approved by the Illinois House of Representatives Labor and Commerce Committee, it did not receive any further consideration prior to adjournment of the Spring Session of the 104th Illinois General Assembly on May 31st. The matter, therefore, remains unsettled.



Even without direction from national and local authorities, electrical contractors and workers can initiate preventative measures on high-temperature days. Here's how to plan for and respond to a heat emergency in five simple steps:

1. Explain Why It Matters

Quick action during a heat emergency saves lives. Recognizing a situation, planning a response, and training on the plan will reduce the severity of heat-related illnesses.

2. Tell Workers What They Need to Know

Recognize the signs and symptoms of heat stress, including elevated body temperature, slurred speech, and abnormal behavior. Know how to help and whom to call.

3. Be Proactive

Encourage these behaviors: staying hydrated daily, resting in shaded or cooled areas without PPE, following the buddy system - don't be alone or leave a co-worker alone.

4. Talk About It

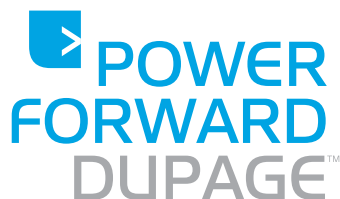
Speak up for yourself and for others who are at risk. If you see something, say something in order to improve the workplace for all.

5. Report a Concern

Bring unsafe conditions to the attention of your employer as the most effective method of getting them addressed and resolved.

Especially this summer, but also year-round, PowerForward DuPage and the Chicagoland Construction Safety Council are pleased to partner and provide IBEW Local 701 employees and employers with the skills they need to create safer work environments.

Robert Lahey is the President & CEO of the Chicagoland Construction Safety Council located in Hillside, Illinois. For more than 30 years, the Council has delivered programs and services in support of its commitment to Safe Workers – Safer Futures. To learn more about its wide range of safety training opportunities, visit www.buildsafe.org.



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The Construction Safety Council, in partnership with the NECA-IBEW 701 Safety Committee, would like to remind you to Work Smart, Build Safe!



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