

1. According to the News & Observer piece, NC-OSHA reforms that were implemented after the tragic fire at the chicken plant in Hamlet have begun to slip. The article cites a sharp drop in both inspections and citations:

'N.C. OSHA inspections and citations have dropped sharply. Total citations sank to about 10,400 last fiscal year - the lowest number in 17 years. Inspections are at their lowest level since 2001.

'And since the mid-1990s, the agency's staffing has failed to keep pace with the growth in the state's workforce.

'Workplace safety advocate Tom O'Connor, who heads the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, said North Carolina's OSHA program is stronger than before the fire. 'It was a big wake-up call,' he said. 'But I think a lot of the promises of really overhauling the program and making it a truly effective deterrent have just not come about.'

In addition, an audit performed by the U.S. Department of Labor determined that NC-OSHA downplays serious safety issues, issues weak fines to violators, and fails to properly handle whistle-blower complaints. Read the whole piece. Worth your time.

2. When asked to be interviewed for the article, North Carolina Commissioner of Labor Cherie Berry, who oversees NC-OSHA and is responsible for workplace safety in North Carolina, declined. However, she did offer to respond to written questions. Defending her record on workplace safety, she made a number of eye-catching comments:

'One cannot discount the fact that North Carolina's workers' comp rates have declined over the years because fewer workplace injury claims were filed.'

'Our state's injury and illness rate is at an all-time low and remains below the national average. The fact that workers' compensation rates have dropped is additional evidence that there are fewer workplace injuries and illnesses.'

'Again, workers' compensation rates and claims have decreased in recent years because of fewer on-the-job injuries and illnesses.'

These quotes are eye-catching because they undermine the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce's justification for the recent 'reforms' to the Workers' Compensation Act, which in many cases limit or restrict the benefits available to injured workers. If workers' compensation rates were falling, why was reform necessary?

3. Finally, it's important to remember that horrible fire at the Hamlet plant in which 25 workers lost their lives. The News & Observer had a remembrance on Sunday as a companion piece to the NC-OSHA article.

Many of those who died in the fire lost their lives because the employer, Imperial Food, had padlocked the exits, which left workers trapped inside the burning plant. Moreover, prior to the fire, NC-OSHA inspectors had never visited the plant. Had the most basic safety rules been followed, many husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers would still be alive right now. We can never forget this tragedy because it can never happen in North Carolina again.