



# **Best Practice Guidelines:**

## Effective Worker Participation in Hazard Assessments

A Project of the Alberta Workers' Health Centre



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**Effective Worker Participation in Hazard Assessments**  
Alberta Workers' Health Centre, December 2015

About the Alberta Workers' Health Centre:

The Alberta Workers' Health Centre is a registered charitable, non-profit organization that supports all workers, unionized and non-unionized, who need assistance to help make their workplaces healthier and safer. Since 1983 it has done this through programs of education and training; research and information; assessment and support for workers across Alberta.

**600, 12323 Stony Plain Road**  
**Edmonton, Alberta T5N 3Y5**  
**780-486-9009**  
**toll free: 1-888-729-4879**  
**[www.workershealthcentre.ca](http://www.workershealthcentre.ca)**



**Alberta Workers'  
Health Centre**

CUPE-SCFP 

# **Best Practice Guidelines:**

## **Effective Worker Participation in Hazard Assessments**

### **Introduction**

Effective participation by workers in the process of hazard identification, elimination and control is essential for effectively identifying and eliminating or reducing the workplace hazards that can lead to injury or illness.

Alberta law requires employers to look for and fix hazards – do a hazard assessment – with worker participation. This is a systematic method to look for work-related hazards and figure out what “fixes” are needed to protect workers’ health and safety. That has been the law since 2009.

Finding and fixing hazards is an essential part of any health and safety prevention program. Effective programs prevent people from getting sick, hurt, or dying because of their job. They are required in many health and safety laws in Canada and elsewhere.

### **Hierarchy of Elimination and Control**

The best “fixes” prevent injuries or illnesses by getting rid of the hazard. Less effective methods only control the hazards and reduce their harm to workers; they do not eliminate the hazard.

Workers who may be affected by the hazards must be part of these assessments. The participation requirement goes further: employers also must involve those workers in coming up with, and implementing, the “fixes”.

### **Why Involve Workers?**

Responsible employers know that worker participation is a key part of a good hazard assessment and the prevention measures that follow. Studies show that effective worker participation leads to healthier and safer jobs and workplaces. Worker participation is part of the health and safety laws in many countries. A common way to do this is to have joint health and safety committees (usually when there are at least 20 employees) or representatives.

Alberta law says workers affected by hazards must be involved in identifying them and in fixing them.

What the Alberta Code is missing is a clear set of ways that this process of hazard assessment, elimination and control should happen.



## Best Practices For Worker Participation

These Guidelines recognize that some forms of worker participation are more effective than others. These Guidelines are designed to promote effective and meaningful worker participation in hazard assessments.

We set out with a goal of providing a set of Best Practices for Worker Participation that is based in research, not myth. The research helped us to understand the barriers to worker participation as well as the practices that overcome those barriers. The research documents have been included in these Best Practice Guidelines so that you can better see why we have included the Best Practices that we did.

This guide provides workers, employers, and inspectors with practical advice on practices that promote effective worker participation.

Considering the wide range of hazards and the very different circumstances and conditions under which they occur, the advice will be general, providing overall guidance on the kinds of practices that work. How you apply these Best Practices in any particular circumstances will depend on those circumstances and the degree to which workers are able to participate.

This advice is drawn from research, recommended practices and from the experience of those in the field of OHS.

## Background

In the spring of 2012 the Alberta Workers' Health Centre embarked on a process of applied research with the goal of giving Alberta workers and employers better tools for engaging in the process of workplace hazard assessment and the elimination or control of those hazards.

A key element of any such process involves full and active engagement of workers themselves. Thus, the focus of the work over the next 18 months was to research the barriers to such full and active engagement.

The process involved a variety of primary and secondary research methods: field observations of a variety of workplaces; face to face interviews with workers, supervisors, health and safety consultants and other 'experts'; focus groups with workers; a survey of over 2000 workers from across Alberta; reviews of published research articles; reviews of documents by health and safety agencies, and industry and labour organizations from across the world. Our goal was to identify the impact of worker participation and to identify the best ways to involve workers in occupational health and safety – so that it made a difference.

We then identified several key 'truths'. One 'truth' is that employers can choose to make their workplaces safer all by themselves—by designing safer and healthier processes and using healthier and safer tools, equipment and substances. This can happen even without strong worker participation. It will substitute for



all manner of program or process. If employers chose to do this by themselves there would be no need for these guidelines.

A second ‘truth’ is that this process of workplace improvement is much more likely to take place if there is active, engaged and informed participation of workers.

## **How To Use These Guidelines**

These Guidelines are designed to be downloaded for print or used directly from the website or as a pdf on your computer or smartphone.

Individual pages, including the Resources, can be downloaded or printed.

## **The Structure of these Best Practice Guidelines**

The Guidelines contain 7 Modules

### **RESEARCH (Module 1.0)**

This module includes research documents that helped us in our work of creating the Best Practices. They capture a huge amount of new and pre-existing data and analysis in this field. Our research processes shined a light on barriers facing workers and front line supervisors from being informed and engaged in the process of hazard identification, elimination and control.

### **WHY? (Module 2.0 and Module 2.1)**

The first two modules explain why it is important for effective hazard assessment processes to be used and why we need effective worker participation in the processes of workplace health and safety, particularly in the process of hazard assessment, elimination and control. These modules summarize the knowledge in ways that may help you understand and make your own case for examining your own hazard assessment processes and improving them if necessary.

### **WHAT? (Module 3.0)**

The next module explains what hazard assessment processes are. It includes the minimum legal requirements for hazard assessments in Alberta, including the requirement for a new assessment when work changes. This module contains the best practices for doing hazard assessments.

### **HOW? (Module 4.0 and Module 4.1)**

These two modules identify barriers to worker participation in the hazard assessment process, and present best practices for reducing or eliminating those barriers and effectively including workers in these processes.



## **RESOURCES (Module 5.0)**

The Resources Module contains links to a number of hands-on tools, practices and additional research that can be used to make your workplace safer and healthier by improving the frequency and quality of worker participation in the process of hazard identification, elimination and control.

The details of some of the research documents are not directly referenced in our Guidelines. We thought it would make the Guidelines too difficult to read and use. We do think that they are important contributions to the discussion about how to make Alberta (and other) workplaces safer and healthier.

## **Help us to Improve these Guidelines**

These Best Practice Guidelines are meant to be a work in progress. We see this as a strength, in that we can improve them by including more of your experiences into future versions.

### **Comment**

We encourage readers and users of this document to comment on it. These comments will be reviewed as a part of our editorial process for consideration in our next version.

### **Send us your stories**

In the process of researching these Guidelines we heard many different stories from workers and supervisors about what they thought worked and what didn't in their own hazard assessment processes. These stories helped give us confidence that these guidelines were based in the Alberta reality. Some comments and stories are noted alongside the Guidelines to help illustrate a key point.

One of the ways in which you can comment on the Guidelines, or a particular point in the Guidelines is by telling us how this aspect or suggestion is used in your workplace. Or you can tell us about your own participation in the processes of Hazard Assessment, Elimination and Control where you work.

You can email your comments and stories to us at:  
[participation@workershealthcentre.ca](mailto:participation@workershealthcentre.ca)

### **Several key persons made strong contributions to the content of these Guidelines.**

A special thanks to all of those workers, front line supervisors, and union and employer health and safety reps who shared with us their work and their experiences and opinions in the research and revisions of this work.



We wish to thank the following individuals for their contributions to this work: (alphabetically) Dr. Bob Barnetson, Kevin Flaherty, Glynn Jones, Andrew King, Gordon Jangula, Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, Darren Puscas, Susan Sawatsky, Joan Schiebelbein, Dorothy Wigmore, Marc Zwelling.

Thanks to the staff and Board of Directors of the Alberta Workers' Health Centre.

Thanks to members of Enform and to Susan Sawatsky and Glynn Jones for allowing us access to their work in the field.

Thanks to Ron Patterson for his design and layout work.

Each made valuable contributions to the research and guidelines. Any mistakes are ours alone.

### **Our Goal - Turning tragedy into better work**

Funding for these Guidelines and the research that went into them was made possible by the deaths of two Alberta workers, arising from two separate workplace tragedies. Under Section 41.1 of the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act, so-called 'Creative Sentencing' allows for the sentences of those convicted under the OHS Act to be diverted into programs or actions which are aimed at preventing further workplace injury or illness. Thanks to Marshall Hopkins for assisting us with this funding process.

We wish to acknowledge those workers' families whose names are withheld out of consideration for the families.

Finning International, acting as a contractor for Suncor Energy, was convicted of a July 8, 2008 workplace fatality.

Bonterra Energy Corp. was convicted under the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act of a May 14, 2009 workplace fatality.

We can only hope that the production and use of these guidelines will help prevent workplace tragedy.

### **About the Alberta Workers' Health Centre:**

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