Site Safety Inspections Fatality File



North Carolina’s lack of workplace inspections is a decades-old issue.

The Dilworth construction site where three men fell to their deaths on Jan. 2 had never been inspected by the North Carolina Department of Labor.

That isn’t uncommon. North Carolina has about one compliance officer per county to conduct safety inspections. Many work sites are never inspected — unless there’s a tragedy.

Carol Brooke, senior attorney at the North Carolina Justice Center, says the state has grappled with this problem since at least the early ’90s, when 25 poultry workers died in a fire, while locked inside the Imperial Food Products plant in Hamlet, North Carolina.

Much like the Dilworth site, the Hanover East Morehead apartments, the poultry plant had never been inspected — not until after the catastrophe.

“We’ve been behind on the number of inspectors since the Hamlet fire in 1991,” Brooke said. “We are in a sad state. And really, we don’t have nearly the number of inspectors that we need to make sure that our workplaces are safe.”

After the Hamlet fire, a few things occurred. The state passed legislation to protect workers against retaliation when reporting unsafe conditions and increased the number of safety inspectors from 60 to 114.

Since that time, North Carolina has added about four million residents, but the number of active compliance officers hasn’t kept pace. Currently, NCDOL says there are 105 officers working statewide. Thirty-three additional compliance jobs are sitting vacant.

“There also aren’t a lot of them that speak Spanish,” Brooke said. “Given that our state often employs Spanish speakers in highly dangerous industries, that’s a real problem.”

Currently, 11 compliance officers in North Carolina speak Spanish, NCDOL said. Three of them work in the Charlotte office, which covers a 15-county area.