



# Health and Safety Guidelines

## Workplace Inspection Guide

**CUPE** / *Canadian Union  
of Public Employees*

Health and Safety Branch





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**IMPORTANT NOTE:** This guide is intended to provide the reader, with information about health and safety and to provide you with guidance towards additional tools found in CUPE Health and Safety Committee kit to address issues within your workplace. This guide is a guide and is not intended to replace the advice of a knowledgeable health and safety professional. Always seek guidance from your Local, your CUPE National Representative or the CUPE National Health and Safety Specialist in your area before taking on complex issues.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main purposes of health and safety committees<sup>1</sup> or health and safety representatives<sup>2</sup> are to identify hazards so that they may be eliminated, or so that proper controls can be put in place to prevent workers from being injured.

Occupational health and safety incident prevention activities in a workplace need to become routine and part of the regular duties of health and safety committees. Part of that routine includes taking a good look at the place where work is being done, to look for things that might put worker health or safety at risk. A workplace inspection is an opportunity for committee members or representatives to examine both the work and the workplace, to look at the condition of the tools or equipment that workers use, the physical environment and the work processes in real time. That's why it's important to do them regularly.

A workplace inspection is an opportunity for committee members or representatives to examine both the work and the workplace, to look at the condition of the tools or equipment that workers use, the physical environment and the work processes in real time.

The purpose of an inspection can be:

- Finding new hazards
- Following-up on controls to make sure they are still working
- Inspecting the site of a potential new work process or machine
- Following-up on new equipment installation
- Following-up on a health and safety concern or risk
- Following-up on previous injury or illness reports

Figuring out the purpose of the inspection will let you prepare for it effectively.

### Why are they important

The occupational health and safety legislation in Canada is based on the internal responsibility system (IRS). The IRS is the philosophy by which all jurisdictions apply health and safety laws.

The foundation of the IRS philosophy is that everyone in the workplace has a role to play in health and safety and that the workplace parties are most likely to find effective solutions when they work together. (See Health and Safety Committee Guide in the CUPE Health and Safety Committee Resource Kit for more on the IRS).

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<sup>1</sup> For this guideline, health and safety committee will refer to the legislatively required committees or committees required by collective agreements. Other names for these committees include Joint Occupational Health and Safety committees (JOHS) or workplace committees (WPC)

<sup>2</sup> Health and safety representative refers to the person who has been chosen by the local to bring health and safety-related concerns to the employer in locations where there is no health and safety committee. Where only the committee is mentioned in this guide, it should be expected that the health and safety representative would be the person to carry out the work where no committee exists.

Workplace inspections are one way that workers, as members of the committee or representatives can participate and inform the employer of work hazards. At the same time, the workplace inspection can be used to let the other workers know that there are hazards in the work, as a hazard can be pointed out to other workers at the time of inspection.

## Legal requirements

Different jurisdictions have different legal requirements about who and how inspections are performed. The CUPE Health and Safety Committee Resource Kit contains a summary table of this information. You should look to your Province or jurisdiction legislation to be sure of inspection rights and requirements.

What is constant is that employers take reasonable steps to protect worker health and safety and that health and safety committee (HSC) members or health and safety representatives should be involved through the entire process. Workers doing workplace inspections have a better understanding of where and what to look for, giving them a better chance at finding problems while they are still minor. The specific process involved in how these inspections take place would be detailed in the workplace inspection policy and program.

When workplace inspections are appropriate for the size and nature of the employer, thorough, done regularly and the identified items are corrected, employers are taking a “reasonable step” to protect workers.

## Worktime for Inspections

Inspections should be performed during work time, and workers should be paid at their regular rate of pay during this and any other health and safety committee or representative activity. Health and safety work should not be considered as special or add on work, rather counted as part of a worker’s time in regular work duties. It is important that the workers who are performing the inspections are granted appropriate leave and their workloads are adjusted accordingly.

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## How to Perform Inspections

Doing a workplace inspection might seem a bit intimidating. Members are often concerned and have many questions such as:

- How are you supposed to know what to look for?
- What happens if you miss something?
- What if you make a mistake?

CUPE’s philosophy to health and safety is that workers know their job best. As such it is their expertise in the workplace that is important. Workers know the work, the workplace, the different processes that might be happening at the same time and the people who work there.

...doing a workplace inspection is about noticing what has changed in the work or workplace and whether that change is good or bad.

That's how you'll be able to spot previously unidentified hazards or changes in the workplace that have created new hazards. It's looking at ceilings, floors, walls, corners and joints to see if they look different than when last you saw them. It's about listening to the workplace to see if you notice a change in the sound of the workplace. It's about talking to workers and asking them if they've noticed anything different, or if they're feeling any ill effects while they're at work. Most often, doing a workplace inspection is about noticing what has changed in the work or workplace and whether that change is good or bad (has created a hazard).

The following sections describe some aspects of good inspection policies and programs.

## Training

A good inspection is done by people who know what they are doing. There are many ways to learn how to do inspections; you can learn by doing (trial and error) or you can learn through training. With time and experience, both ways will eventually get you to perform a good inspection. But getting training first is like getting a head start. The CUPE Health and Safety Learning Series has a module on workplace inspections that would be a great way to start to build the skills that you need. Locals can get assistance from their CUPE National Servicing Representatives for scheduling workshops.

## Planning

Planning the inspection is an important first step. You need to know when and where the inspection will take place, and who else might be involved. Planning your inspection will ensure that you have all the tools at your disposal and that the inspection will go as smoothly as possible.

Here are some things to consider when you're planning an inspection.

**Determine what the purpose of the inspection will be.** You want to know ahead of time what type of inspection you're going to be doing. For example, is it a routine workplace inspection or the inspecting of a new piece of equipment? The purpose of the inspection will inform how much time needs to be scheduled and who needs to be involved based on their expertise. For example, if you're doing an inspection of the ventilation system, you would likely want to include the people who maintain it and schedule a shorter period of time than what would be required to do the routine inspection of an entire building and any exterior grounds. The purpose of the inspection will also determine how often to do it. For example, routine inspections may have a legal requirement to be performed monthly or regularly. You should check the occupational health and safety requirement in your jurisdiction.

**Determine what type of spaces the inspection will cover.** You want to know ahead of time what particular areas you're going to be inspecting. Different spaces have different legal requirements.

For example, if there is a confined space, there may be requirements just to enter the confined space. Knowing what areas contain before you perform the inspection will let you know how much time and what tools or personal protective equipment you might need to do the inspection properly. It also gives you the opportunity to inform the supervisor or manager that the inspection will be happening in their area. That helps to minimize disruptions.

**Determine what kind of work is done there.** Knowing what work is done before you perform the inspection will let you know what types of hazards could be present in the workplace. Specific types of hazards have specific requirements in legislation and regulation. Knowing what types of hazards are present in the work will give you an opportunity to review legal requirements and helps inform your inspection. Even in a single workplace, there can be many different types of work being performed. For example, in a school, there might be teaching in classrooms, clerical work in offices, scientific experiments in laboratories, decorations built in the woodworking shop, exercise in a gym or pool and growing vegetables in the greenhouse. In the office, the committee may be on the lookout for repetitive strain injuries and air quality issues. In the greenhouse, the committee could expect to find a humid, warm environment and hazards related to plants, the chemicals used to fertilize and treat them and clean the equipment, and the tools in use – things that you would not expect to see in an office space. To learn about the type of work, it helps to speak with workers in the area before and during the inspection and review any safe work procedures that have been developed for the work in that area.

**Determine what kind of equipment is used.** Knowing what equipment is in use before you perform the inspection will let you know what expertise you might need. No one would expect a person to be an expert in every piece of equipment that might be used in a workplace. For example, a HSC inspector in a municipality might be inspecting a day care, a long-term care home and a bus depot. It is unlikely that the inspector is going to be an expert on ceiling lifts and buses. But knowing that there are ceiling lifts and buses means that you can request manuals or maintenance records before you head out. It also means that if it's not your area of expertise, you should plan to talk to workers. They do have that expertise and can let you know if everything is working as it should or if there are problems.

**Determine what previous inspections have found.** Knowing what problems were previously identified in those areas before you perform the inspection will let you know what to follow-up on to ensure completion and to ensure no new hazard have been created. It's an easy way to verify that the system is working and that deficiencies are being corrected. If they have been corrected, you can talk to the workers there to see if things have improved, or if there are still outstanding issues. If items are not corrected, then they may to be referred to the health and safety committee, and a recommendation may be required.

**Determine where incidents (including injuries and near misses) have occurred.** Knowing where all the incidents have occurred gives the committee member or representative a chance to take a second look at the space, outside of the stress or processes that come with incident investigations. That gives the member or representative the opportunity to see if there are

contributing factors that may have contributed to the injury. It also gives you the chance to follow-up with workers to see if they have been exposed to any similar circumstances or if they know of things that might have contributed to the injury. For example, if you know that there was an injury where a worker fell down some stairs coming in out of the rain, you might inspect the staircase a bit closer to see if the anti-slip treads need to be replaced, or if the mats are out of place, if the railing is secure or the lighting is adequate. You might also ask workers if anyone else had slipped on the floors coming in out of the rain or if they had a close call in the staircase.

## **Preparing for the Inspection**

Once the location and jobs to be inspected have been decided, the equipment needed for the inspection can be determined. This may be a good time to review any legislative changes that may have happened since the last inspection.

Here are some things that you might need to do the inspection:

- Clipboard and inspection forms with extra note paper
- Writing materials and post-it notes
- Floor plans
- Maintenance records
- A list of potential questions for workers
- Notice of inspection to the supervisor or manager and permission to be there
- A camera (Note: this may not be appropriate at all times, like when children are present)
- Any personal protective equipment or tools required in each area
- An ID tag that identifies you as the HSC worker inspector
- Past inspection reports for the inspection areas
- Injury reports from the inspection areas
- Minutes of past HSC meeting

It's a good practice to let the supervisor or manager know ahead of time that you'll be in the workplace inspecting. That way, they are not surprised to see you, which can make getting into specific areas a lot easier and will be less disrupting to the workers.

## **Performing the inspection**

Keep in mind that no one is expected to be an expert on every aspect of a workplace. That's why talking to workers during inspections is a great idea. Every worker is the expert in the work that they do. Workers are the most likely to know:

- What tools and equipment they use and how those tools and equipment work or should work.
- The sequence of work tasks throughout the workday.
- The people who work alongside them.
- Where improvements could be made.

- Where the problems could occur.

When you're speaking to workers, ask them specific questions about any change they may have observed. If you ask them: "How is everything?" or "Do you have any concerns?", it is very possible that the answer will be no. People often get into a routine about their work and can easily accommodate a small change if it's not too disruptive or irritating. They adapt and forget. But if you specifically ask them "Has there been anything that has changed about your work or the tools that you use?", you're asking them to turn their mind to a specific thing and consider their work in the last little while. You're more likely to get an answer that can point you to a hazard.

## Hazards to Consider

There are different kinds of hazards that could be present in the workplace. CUPE's Health and Safety Learning Series has a great module on hazard identification that can help you build more skills. Here are some of the things that you may want to focus on during your inspection:

- Slips, trips and fall hazards or obstructed hallways
- Chemical hazards like cleaners, disinfectants or floor strippers
- Biological hazards like viruses, bacteria or blood
- Physical hazards like radiation, heat or vibrations
- How materials are handled and stored
- Repetitive work
- Systemic issues (related to the way work is organized or performed)
- Violence related hazards
- Staffing levels and workload
- Ergonomic hazards, like badly fitting chairs or improper equipment, that can cause pain to joints and muscles
- Maintenance or signs of wear and tear
- Mechanical hazards like machines that can pinch, cut
- Follow-up on any previously identified item or any injury

Let your experience and the experience of workers guide you. If they're telling you there's a problem, there probably is one.

The CUPE health and safety committee resource kit provides a very detailed sample checklist for performing inspections.

Remember – this is only a guide. Let your experience and the experience of workers guide you. If they're telling you there's a problem, there probably is one.

## Joint vs Individual Inspections

There are workplaces where inspections are done with management and worker members of the Health and Safety Committee. There are good and bad consequences to this, and what the outcome will be is usually a reflection of the workplace relationships. Having a management member present during the inspection can have a positive impact:

- Easier to have leaves granted
- First hand view at workplace problems
- Facilitate access to specific areas
- Adds a knowledge of administration processes that workers may not have

There can also be some negative impacts of having management present:

- Workers you speak to may not want to disclose concerns in front of management
- There could be pressure not to report items
- There could be pressure to rush through (because they're 'busy'...)
- There could be disagreement about what is/is not a hazard

It is important to remember that during the inspections, all potential hazards should be recorded,

Don't let someone else prevent you from writing down a hazard that you have found during your inspection.

even if there is disagreement between the inspection team. Don't let someone else prevent you from writing down a hazard that you have found during your inspection. When the committee members sign an inspection form, that signature indicates that they are agreeing with what the report contains, and that it is accurate.

If the inspection process becomes a problem, make sure that you let your CUPE Local Executive know, so that they can contact your CUPE National Servicing Representative and/or the CUPE National Health and Safety Department. There are ways that issues can be addressed – you're not alone.

## Note Taking

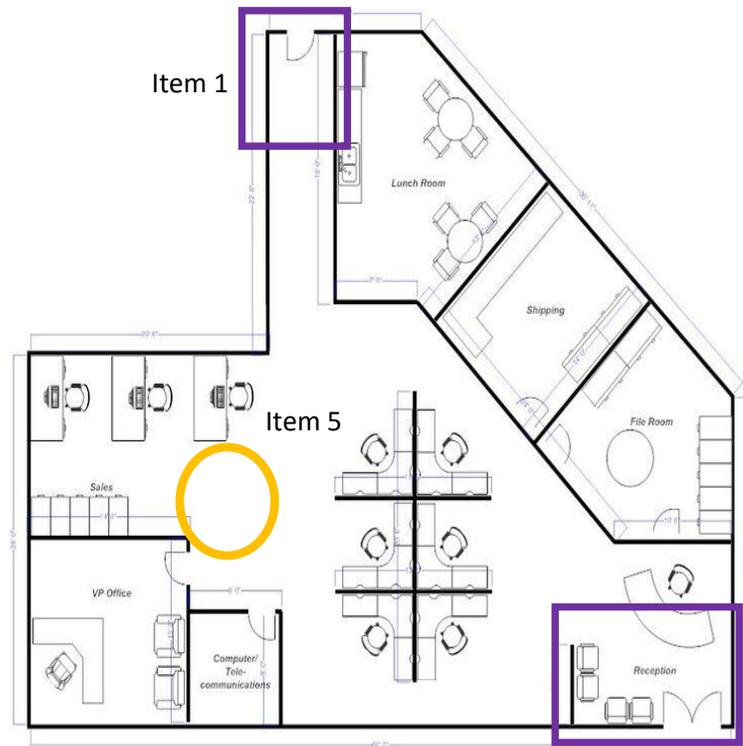
The information that you collect about hazards in the workplace must be communicated to management and other workers in a way that lets them know where the problems are. Workplace inspection reports are not confidential documents and posting them in the workplace on the health and safety board is a great way to make information available to all workers.

When preparing an inspection report, clearly identify what the hazard is and where it can be found. If a worker has a suggestion on how that hazard can be addressed, make sure that information is included. Sometimes, there is not enough room to write everything down or sketch locations on the standard form, so always bring along extra copies or blank paper. You can use those extra sheets to sketch the location of a problem or write down additional details that would help communicate the problem.

For example, noting on an inspection report that “water stain on ceiling” and “a risk of workplace violence in the common area” doesn't really point to any specific location in the common area and can make it harder to find for the people coming to fix the problem. They could think it's somewhere else and not find the right problem. It's not necessarily obvious what the workplace violence risks are.

But if the inspection report includes a floor plan (even a rough sketch), the information is easier to understand and cross-reference once it is received. For example, looking at the diagram, the information above becomes clearer: “there is evidence of a water leak (item 5, circle) and there are no barriers to the entire workplace from both entrances (item 1, rectangles) that creates a risk of workplace violence to all the workers”.

Taking good notes will let everyone understand what and where the hazards are and make discussion at the health and safety committee meeting easier.



## Tips

- Not all hazards have an immediate consequence. If you feel something is hazardous even if it has not injured a worker, it’s important to still consider it a hazard.
- Talk to workers to find out what their experience is. Don’t forget to ask front-line supervisors or managers if they are aware of any issues in the workplace.
- Use the floor plan to indicate the location of a hazard mentioned in the inspection report.
- If you don’t have a floor plan already, you could find one in your building’s fire plan.
- You can take pictures for reference points.
- Consider amending your form to include past injury report references.
- Identify items in sequence (assigning a number) with no repeats from month to month – that way, when people make reference to inspection item 72, everyone will know which item is being discussed. It will also make it easier to spot a reoccurring problem. For example, they could be identified as follows: items 112, 113, 114, 43, 115.
- To further help with classification, the code could include the year. For example, the list above could become the following: items 2017-112, 2017-113, 2017-114, 2016-43, 2017-115.
- Check in with the area supervisor or manager after the inspection to fill them in on what you’ve found.

## **How to report the inspection results**

Now that you've planned, prepared, conducted a workplace inspection and taken notes on the different hazards in the work being done in the workplace, it's time to prepare the inspection report.

### **Analyzing**

As the inspection is finalized, it's a good practice to go over the items again. Check to make sure that hazards are clearly identified, that it's clear what the problems are and where they can be found.

There is no real requirement to suggest ways to fix the problems, as recommendation will be discussed at the joint health and safety committee. But if there are obvious solutions to some of the problems or workers suggest fixes, it can be indicated on the report form next to the item or as additional information. For example, it could be that item 1 from the floorplan example above (workplace violence risk) could include a solution or recommendation like "restrict access by locking the doors and installing video cameras and a buzz-in at reception." If the suggested fix is reasonable and would take care of the health and safety hazard, it is very possible that a manager or supervisor will approve it.

The people who performed the inspection might also be asked to give your best guess as to how fast something needs to be fixed. There is no real problem with this if it is clear that everything needs to be addressed. In some workplaces, you may run into the problem that items that are identified as being low priority take a long time to get addressed, or don't get addressed at all. It's okay to prioritize other things as being more urgent, but there still needs to be action on non-urgent items. If a low priority item keeps coming back as a low-priority item, it might be time for a recommendation.

### **Recommendations**

It is common for workplace inspection forms to be taken as is and to have a recommendation that everything identified addressed as soon as possible. Some jurisdictions have legal obligations when it comes to recommendations, so make sure you check to see what applies to your work and workplace. The CUPE health and safety committee resource kit provide a document on the requirement and process for writing recommendations. Additionally, the CUPE Health and Safety Learning Series has a workshop committee functions and writing recommendations that can help you build the skills you need to write effective recommendations.

It is very possible that there may be workplace hazards that require more in-depth discussion and more information. Recommendation can be made that specific items be discussed at the health and safety committee meeting to find more complete solutions.

## **Tips**

- If the committee doesn't know enough about a particular hazard, ask for a presentation on the topic at the next HSC meeting
- Ask workers about what they think might be helpful to fix a problem.

## **What to do after**

After the report has been written, it's time to share that information. The report contains hazards in the work and the workplace. A good way for the employer to fulfill the duty to ensure that workers are aware of all hazards in the workplace is to have a copy of the inspection reports in the workplace somewhere that workers can find and access them easily. That could be a binder in the lunch room or posted on the health and safety board. Other people who need to have a copy are the front-line supervisor or manager, the HSC, a property manager (as applicable). The workplace inspection policy and program should include the list of positions/people that need to be provided with a copy of the inspection reports.

It's a good practice meet with the manager or supervisor in the area to go over what you've found during your inspection report, especially if you couldn't discuss them at the time of the inspection. This gives the people who have the direct responsibility for the work area the opportunity to be involved. Just like workers, front-line supervisors and managers have expertise and experience that can be valuable to finding effective solutions to workplace problems.

## **Health and Safety Committee Meeting**

There should always be an opportunity to discuss the results of a workplace inspections during the committee meeting. When the meeting agenda is being prepared, it's a good idea to indicate if there are items in the inspection reports that need to be discussed as separate agenda items. You might want to bring attention to a reoccurring low-priority item, an item of greater concern or discuss the follow-up of a recently addressed item.

It is important to ensure that workers are informed by the employer about the hazard and temporary measures are put in place while you are looking for more permanent solutions. An example of this could be to seal off and make sure that no one can enter a room where there has been a ceiling collapse because of a water leak while awaiting repairs.

From the floorplan example, you might want to flag the risks of workplace violence. That would allow you to have a greater discussion of the risks at the entrances and potential solutions. For example, maybe you also need to change the doors to make them secure enough when locked to prevent someone from breaking them down. You might find that you need to add a barrier between the public and the reception, with an additional door to restrict access to the whole workplace at the point of entry. This kit includes tools for Health and Safety Committee meetings and recommendations to assist you.

## **Following Up**

Once items have been raised with the health and safety committee and the management team, it's important to follow-up on those items to track progress. There are many items raised in any given year, and it would be quite easy to lose track of some of them if there is only 1 person managing them all. You want to make sure that you check back a few times with any solution. Remember that change can be hard for some. It could be that at the beginning, people are struggling a bit with process change. Having a second follow-up can help to evaluate that change over time.

## **Final Tips**

- Have one master sheet of all the inspection items in order. Once items are addressed, they can be removed from the master list. (This is easier if the file is computerized.)
- Put items that have been recently corrected on a future inspection list to make sure that the solutions are working well and protecting workers.

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