



Recommendations for meat and poultry processing workers

Legislative report from the worker rights coordinator

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Introduction

This report provides examples of meat-packing workers' experiences, industry trends and recommendations to state leaders to promote better treatment of meat-processing workers, as required by the Safe Workplaces for Meat and Poultry Processing Workers Act (Safe Workplaces Act), Minnesota Statutes §§ 179.87-179.877. In the second year of implementation of this act, the worker rights coordinator (WRC) conducted outreach, education and engagement, and other compliance activities, including 40 plant visits.

The Safe Workplaces Act established the role of the WRC for the meat and poultry processing industry at the Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) and provides protections for meat-processing workers, including employees, independent contractors and those hired through a temporary service or staffing agency. Meat-processing workers are those who, while doing work for a meat-processing employer: work directly in contact with raw meatpacking products in a meatpacking operation; inspect or package meatpacking products; or clean, maintain or sanitize equipment or surfaces. More information about the Safe Workplaces Act is online at dli.mn.gov/business/employment-practices/safe-workplaces-meat-and-poultry-processing-workers-act.

In general, the education and outreach strategies of visiting meatpacking and poultry processing plants and bringing an educational approach to compliance in the first year were successful. If an employer was found to be noncompliant, the WRC answered questions, provided template notices and provided information regarding deficiencies and next steps to come into compliance. Spending time on site at plants to educate, inform and listen to employers and employees has proved invaluable in better understanding the industry, its needs and the opportunities to improve the treatment and working conditions of workers.

Last year's focus on informal "inform and educate" letters to employers to bring them into compliance has improved the safety, health and other working conditions for meat and poultry processing workers in the state. For example, some employers translated their employee handbooks and other documents into several languages to abide by laws that apply to the meatpacking and poultry processing industries. In some workplaces, employers added interpreters to make meetings more accessible. In the second year of implementation, the WRC has seen many employers covered by the law improve their workplaces after having some issues with compliance last year.

Implementation

In 2025, the WRC visited a total of 40 facilities. This included 29 facilities with 100 or more employees that fall under the jurisdiction of the Safe Workplaces Act. Additionally, the WRC visited 11 facilities with fewer than 100 employees to determine compliance with meat and poultry processing industry-specific laws other than the Safe Workplaces Act, including the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights law (Minn. Stat. § 179.86) and the Recruitment in Food Processing Employment law (Minn. Stat. § 181.635).

During each visit, the WRC conducted a thorough review of a comprehensive checklist specifically designed for meatpacking and poultry processing employers. This checklist encompasses various critical requirements related to labor laws and employee rights.

While on site, the WRC engaged the employer in a detailed discussion that covered essential topics, such as: earned sick and safe time (ESST), child labor restrictions, minimum wage, overtime laws, the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights, parental and pregnancy leave, pregnancy and nursing accommodations, recordkeeping requirements, rest and meal breaks, and employee wage notifications. For more detail about the site visit protocol, checklist and materials, see last year's report online at dli.mn.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/safe_workplaces_act_report_2024.pdf.

The WRC dedicated approximately 142 hours in 2025 to on-site meetings with employers and employees in the meat and poultry industry, engaging in meaningful dialogue, touring facilities and listening attentively to workers' experiences. During this in-depth monitoring and inspection, the WRC conducted interviews with 76 employer representatives and connected with 136 workers, gathering invaluable insights into the industry's dynamics and challenges. The various issues identified during site visits were addressed using both informal and formal channels. These approaches included direct communication via email, as well as methods such as inform and educate letters, wage claims and investigations. Each method was chosen based on the specific nature of the issue and the needs of the individuals involved, ensuring the resolutions were both effective and appropriate.

Select workers' experiences

The following worker stories were selected from the interviews the WRC conducted this year. Names and other identifying details of workers have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Employee grateful to have paid time for medical appointments

Melissa works for a small employer in Greater Minnesota in a meat-processing plant and has a chronic health condition that requires weekly medical appointments. She sometimes cannot make it to her appointments because they conflict with her work schedule. The WRC explained that Melissa is eligible for ESST under state law to attend medical appointments, accruing up to 48 ESST hours a year (unless the employer agrees to provide a higher amount). Even though the employer had an ESST program in place, Melissa did not know about it and did not know it applied to her. The WRC explained that her employer generally cannot deny her the use of ESST for covered reasons. Melissa was grateful to learn ESST can provide her a way to continue to take care of herself, get compensated and keep her job. The WRC also followed up with the employer to provide resources to better inform its employees of their right to ESST.

This story highlights that sometimes an employer may think they have provided adequate information, and still not all employees know their rights. The WRC's outreach and education help employees use the Minnesota labor laws that apply to them and help employers come into compliance.

Employee learns she is eligible for job-protected parental leave

Kim works for a meat-processing plant in Greater Minnesota. She asked her human resources (HR) department if she could take parental leave to give birth and was told she didn't qualify because she had not been with the company for a full year. The WRC listened to Kim's story and explained the Minnesota Pregnancy and Parental Leave law (Minn. Stat. § 181.941) does not require a minimum time period of work for employees to be eligible

to take leave. She was relieved to learn her job was protected during her leave. The WRC had a conversation with the plant's HR staff members to clarify the differences between the federal Family and Medical Leave Act and Minnesota's Pregnancy and Parental Leave law. The staff members learned more about the applicable state law and promised to update the employee handbook to align with the law.

This story highlights that outreach and education for pregnant employees and HR staff members can successfully bring more employers into compliance and ensure more employees are able to exercise the rights they have under state law.

Employee fears retaliation

Charlie works for a meat-processing plant in Greater Minnesota. One day last winter, the time clock machine did not accurately record his hours worked when he punched in; as a result, Charlie was not paid for all hours worked. He reported the issue to his supervisor who assured him that he would resolve it. A few months later, when Charlie asked about it again, the supervisor said he forgot about it and now it was too late to correct it. Charlie did not pursue the issue any further because he did not want to cause any problems or face retaliation. Even though the WRC talked to Charlie about how he is protected from retaliation under the law, Charlie still chose not to follow up. The WRC reviewed Minnesota's anti-retaliation provisions with the employer to ensure they know and follow relevant law.

This story highlights that even after education and outreach to inform employees of their rights, and employers of their responsibilities, some workers still fear retaliation and may not take further action if their rights are violated.

Coordinated approach to education and outreach

While the Safe Workplaces Act requires a dedicated WRC who visits and inspects meatpacking and poultry processing facilities in Minnesota, the role exists within a wider network of workplace outreach, education and enforcement activity at DLI. The WRC interviews employees and employer representatives and provides education and outreach specifically to those in the meatpacking and poultry processing industry, while DLI's broader Labor Standards Division conducts education and outreach activities for all industries; oftentimes, the broader division and the WRC work together to improve workplace protection compliance in Minnesota.

From October 2024 to October 2025, the WRC and Labor Standards Division staff members conducted a total of 34 outreach events, reaching approximately 12,308 community members; these particular events took place in communities where many community members work in the meatpacking and poultry processing industries. Additionally, the division hosted webinars and Facebook Live sessions reaching community members, union representatives and community leaders who live in or serve meatpacking and poultry processing industry communities.

Through targeted outreach initiatives, the WRC has established strong partnerships with various stakeholders, significantly enhancing communication and trust. Recently, the WRC received inquiries from stakeholders regarding issues of labor laws and employee rights, indicating a growing awareness and concern within the community.

For example, the WRC received a call from a former employee eager to recount their experiences working with a company. Recognizing the importance of firsthand accounts in understanding workplace dynamics, the WRC organized a dedicated outreach event. During this event, the WRC and representatives from DLI proactively engaged with current employees through door-to-door outreach.

This approach created a more inviting and safer environment for employees, allowing them to express their concerns and inquire about their rights without fear their employer would see them talking with the WRC or other DLI representatives and retaliate as a result. The WRC's strategic decision to hold such interactions outside the workplace fostered a sense of comfort and open dialogue among employees.

Moreover, the WRC has conducted several similar outreach events, going beyond traditional communication methods to meet employees in relaxed settings. These initiatives not only empower workers by educating them about their rights but also reinforce the WRC's commitment to fully learning about worker experiences.

In collaboration with various divisions within DLI, the WRC recently delivered an engaging joint presentation aimed specifically at employees in the meat and poultry industry. This informative session covered critical topics, such as labor standards, Minnesota OSHA (MNOSHA) guidelines and workers' compensation. It marked just one of the many collaborative efforts the WRC is committed to pursuing, all designed to enrich the knowledge and safety practices within this vital industry.

Labor Standards Division

DLI's Labor Standards Division ensures compliance with numerous state labor and employment laws, including but not limited to the Minnesota Fair Labor Standards Act, the Minnesota Payment of Wages Act, the Women's Economic Security Act (WESA), the Minnesota Child Labor Standards Act, the state's earned sick and safe time law, various anti-retaliation provisions and misclassification laws. It also recovers back wages, damages, penalties and other relief through its enforcement actions. In addition, the Labor Standards Division helps to keep Minnesota employees and workplaces safe and in compliance with state labor and employment laws by engaging with and educating workers, employers and other stakeholders about the laws it enforces to prevent violations from occurring.

Trends in DLI inquiries and complaints from meatpacking workers

The WRC's dedicated outreach and education activities help provide a picture of the worker and employer questions and concerns in the meatpacking industry, but DLI's broader Labor Standards Division staff also provides services to this industry through inquiries and complaints it receives. The Labor Standards Division receives phone calls and email messages from workers and other stakeholders throughout Minnesota, not limited to the meatpacking and poultry processing industry. A review of the division's meatpacking and poultry processing-related intake records from October 2024 to October 2025 shows DLI received calls or email messages about 23 potential violations. The concerns included the following:

- breaks;
- child labor;
- earning statements;
- ESST;

- personnel records;
- reason for termination;
- retaliation;
- wage theft; and
- WESA.

Some of these contacts occurred directly as a result of WRC visits and some of them came unsolicited from workers without prior contact with the WRC.

Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Administration

The goal of the Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MNOSHA) is that every employee returns home safe and healthy at the end of each working day. MNOSHA focuses on regulation through its Compliance unit and on assistance through its Workplace Safety Consultation unit, helping industries with the highest injury and illness rates.

In the course of interviewing employers' representatives and employees, the WRC heard about situations and concerns related to compliance with MNOSHA's laws and regulations. MNOSHA will continue to provide information to the WRC about the responsibilities of MNOSHA, how it conducts inspections and the employer's responsibility to comply with all MNOSHA standards. As part of his work, the WRC provides this information to employer representatives and workers and helps to facilitate referrals to MNOSHA where warranted.

MNOSHA Workplace Safety Consultation offers the Minnesota Ergonomics Safety Grant Program that allows qualifying employers to request grant funds to make improvements in their worksites to reduce the risk of ergonomic injuries. Eligible companies can request up to \$10,000. In 2024, two meatpacking plants applied for and received ergonomics safety grants. As of October 2025, none had done so for this year. More information is available at dli.mn.gov/business/workplace-safety-and-health/safety-grant-program-ergonomics.

Meatpacking worker injuries and illnesses in Minnesota, 2019-2024

The Bureau of Labor Statistics conducts an annual Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses (SOII) that is a record of work-related injuries and illnesses. Because of the data cleaning and statistical process for estimating statewide data, it is a comprehensive source of data to understand workplace injuries and illnesses in Minnesota. SOII data for 2024 is the most recent available and shows incidence rates among meatpacking workers have consistently exceeded those of the general private-industry rate and rates observed in manufacturing over the past five years.

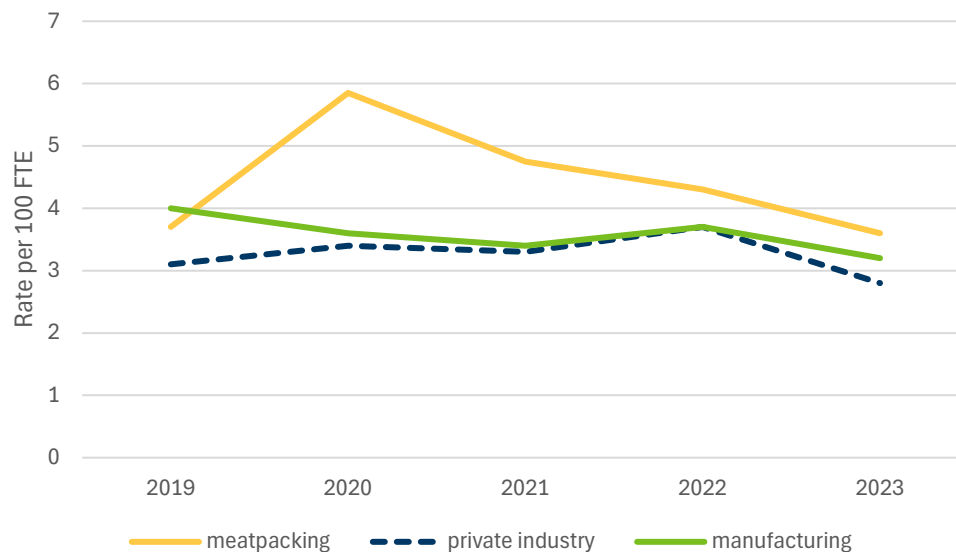
SOII publishes rates of injury and illness per 100 full-time-equivalent (FTE) workers, which allows for easy comparison between industries. In 2019, the rate was 3.7 incidents per 100 FTE workers. The rate peaked in 2020 at 5.85 incidents per 100 FTE workers. Since then, the rate has declined steadily, reaching 3.6 in 2023.

In contrast, the manufacturing industry started at 4.0 incidents per 100 FTE workers in 2019, higher than the meatpacking industry. The rate dipped during the pandemic, but rebounded slightly to 3.7 in 2022 and then declined again to 3.2 in 2023. Since 2020, manufacturing has consistently reported lower injury and illness rates than the meatpacking industry.

Private industry, overall, showed relatively stable rates from 2019 to 2022, fluctuating between 3.1 and 3.7 incidents per 100 FTE workers. In 2023, the rate dropped sharply to 2.8, the lowest in the five-year period. Throughout this timeframe, private industry maintained lower rates than the meatpacking industry. However, the overall trend for meatpacking is a gradual decline in injuries and illnesses following a spike in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is too early to identify if the decline in injuries and illnesses in meatpacking is due, in part, to the implementation of the Safe Workplaces Act on Aug. 1, 2023.

Figure 1 shows the trend of rates of injuries and illnesses for meatpacking, manufacturing and private industries.

Figure 1: SOII injuries and illnesses rates for meatpacking, manufacturing and private industries, Minnesota 2019-2023



Recommendations

The meat and poultry processing industry faces various challenges. One of the primary issues the WRC continued to hear about is inadequate communication between the office staff and other workers. This disconnect often leads to misunderstandings and a lack of clarity regarding expectations, which can exacerbate tensions within the workplace.

This absence of clear communication was strikingly evident during interviews with female employees, many of whom were completely unaware of the protections afforded to them under WESA for pregnant employees and employees who are new parents. While the office staff may understand the legal requirements under WESA, a disconnect seemed to exist between it and frontline production leads or supervisors, creating significant barriers to meatpacking and poultry processing workers understanding and exercising their rights under WESA.

Furthermore, in recent visits to smaller meatpacking and poultry processing facilities, the WRC noted a trend: many of these employers are not fully aware of their labor standards obligations, including those that apply specifically to their industry, as well as laws that apply to all or most industries, such as WESA and ESST. (See “Select worker testimonies” on page two for some examples.)

Employees

These recommendations stem from interviews with randomly selected employees at meat and poultry processing plants. Through these interviews, the WRC identified a specific overall theme regarding training.

Many employees shared concerns about a lack of training or information and suggested companies implement more comprehensive training programs, not only about safety and job tasks, but also about employees' rights. They also believe it would be beneficial to have trainers who not only possess a strong grasp of the material, but also have a genuine enthusiasm for teaching so training is more engaging. Some workers noted that some trainers were not able to adequately communicate with workers due to language barriers. Overall, weak training led workers to feel like their work environment was less safe.

Employees also mentioned it would be beneficial for employers to periodically review or provide training about the forms and documents they received on their first day of employment with their employees. Many employees have been with their companies for years and do not remember all the initial information they received, especially when new laws are introduced.

It is critical all staff members receive comprehensive training, especially those in lead and supervisory roles, because these individuals sometimes make important decisions without communicating with the office staff in advance. These positions need full awareness of the laws that apply to their workplace to foster a safer and more informed work environment.

On one visit, the WRC talked with a lead or supervisor on the production floor who described how she was not provided any information or guidance regarding her rights as a pregnant worker. Recognizing the need for more support for pregnant employees, she took the initiative to conduct her own research. While she found abundant information online, it was challenging for her to discern what was accurate and applicable to her situation.

She recounted several instances where she felt unwell and had to call in sick, highlighting her struggle to balance her health and work responsibilities. This employee, despite having a more advanced position in the workplace and feeling comfortable enough to ask questions and request needed accommodations, was unaware of all her rights related to pregnancy and lactating while at work, leading her to express milk only during her breaks. Given her role as a lead or supervisor and her fluency in English, it's concerning to think similar issues could be affecting hourly employees who may not have the same resources or understanding of their rights. This situation underscores the importance of ensuring all employees, regardless of their language skills, receive the support and information they need during such a significant time in their lives.

Many production workers shared their frustration and disappointment as they recounted instances where their leads or supervisors failed to honor their rights related to pregnancy accommodations. In several cases, pregnant employees reported being denied essential accommodations in their work environments, which could have supported their health and well-being. Additionally, there were troubling accounts of supervisors neglecting to provide adequate breaks for lactation, leaving new mothers feeling unsupported during a critical time and even in physical pain because of the inability to express breast milk. These stories highlight a pattern, emphasizing the urgent need for improved policies, information sharing and increased enforcement to protect impacted workers.

Employers' representatives

During plant visits, the WRC interviewed plant managers, supervisors and other employer representatives and developed a list of recommendations from these interviews. Generally, employer representatives expressed they would like more information and support for meeting general worker safety requirements.

Employers have asked that the WRC share a compliance checklist developed for plant visits with them and DLI has agreed to do so. By making this checklist more readily available, employers will have a useful tool to proactively ensure they are meeting their obligations and align their practices with the legal standards required for safe and healthy operations.

The WRC also found that engaging with small meatpacking and poultry processing employers is incredibly valuable. Many of these businesses are not fully aware of their labor standards obligations. As a result, it is recommended the WRC continue to place a focus on these employers in addition to larger employers that fall under the jurisdiction of the Safe Workplaces Act to improve compliance in the industry overall for the benefit of both employers and workers.

Challenges

Conducting visits and outreach to the meatpacking and poultry processing facilities that fall under the jurisdiction of the Safe Workplaces Act is challenging for one person due to geographic and logistical demands; these challenges were even greater during the past year, as the WRC started to visit smaller facilities to address labor standards compliance. In all, there are approximately 91 meatpacking and poultry processing facilities disbursed throughout the state. This distribution requires significant travel, often spanning hundreds of miles and hours of driving.

Each facility needs individualized attention for initial contact, coordination, scheduling, on-site visits and follow-up. Larger facilities typically have complex operations, requiring engagement with various departments, while smaller ones may require a more personalized approach. Furthermore, outreach is a continual process involving relationship building and support, making it difficult for one position to manage all meatpacking and poultry processing facilities as effectively as possible. As a result, this industry and its workforce would benefit from an additional WRC to provide education, outreach, inspections and technical assistance, and otherwise support general compliance in the industry.

New laws in 2026

Next year's plans for the WRC will include providing information and education about two new or updated laws taking effect Jan. 1, 2026, and impacting the meat and poultry processing industry.

Break time

This updated law provides specific requirements for rest breaks and meal breaks for eligible employees.

Under the updated rest break law, employers must allow employees to take rest breaks that:

- last at least 15 minutes;

- occur within each four consecutive hours of work; and
- provide time to use the nearest restroom or otherwise take a break.

Under the updated meal break law, employers must allow employees to take a meal break that:

- lasts at least 30 minutes;
- occurs when working six or more consecutive hours; and
- provides time to eat a meal.

Under state law, breaks of fewer than 20 minutes must be paid. Other breaks can be unpaid, provided the employee is completely relieved of work duties. If the employee is not completely relieved of work duties, the break must be paid.

Minnesota’s meal and rest break laws state that employers and employees may establish break requirements different from those provided under Minnesota law in a collective bargaining agreement. The meal and rest break requirements are part of Minnesota’s Fair Labor Standards Act (MFLSA) and apply to “employees.” However, there are exceptions to who is considered an “employee” under Minnesota Statutes § 177.23, subdivision 7, for purposes of MFLSA coverage.

These exceptions include, but are not limited to:

- certain agricultural workers;
- individuals employed in a bona fide executive, administrative or professional capacity; and
- certain seasonal day camp staff members.

Employers are not required to allow breaks under Minnesota law for workers who fall under these exceptions.

Minnesota Paid Leave

Starting in January 2026, Paid Leave will ensure Minnesotans can take the time they need to be there for some of life’s most important moments – such as welcoming a child, recovering from a serious illness or caring for a loved one. Paid Leave coverage is very broad, it covers nearly every employer, regardless of business size, revenue or number of employees. It covers nearly every employee – including full time, part time, temporary and most seasonal workers.

Minnesota Paid Leave is a state-run insurance program that provides payments and job protections when people need to care for themselves or their loved ones. Much like private insurance, the program is funded through premiums that are split between employers and employees. DLI is responsible for ensuring compliance with the job protections required under Minnesota Paid Leave.

Conclusion

The Safe Workplaces Act has been in place for nearly two years and the education and outreach strategies to reach employers has brought more of them into compliance, meaning more employees are experiencing the benefits and protections under the law. The follow-up from some of the on-site visits is still in progress and, if a

more informal educational approach does not lead to compliance, the WRC can elevate the concerns to more formal enforcement actions.

The WRC continues to work in partnership with other DLI staff members to share lessons learned about how to reach employers and employees with informational and educational messages. The relationships the WRC has developed are a testament to dedicated community and employer engagement strategies, especially showing up in person and following up with resources. This ongoing work demonstrates the Department of Labor and Industry's commitment to the people of Minnesota.