

# Trump Administration Launches Effort to Help Employers Comply With Labor Laws

Office of Compliance Initiatives will help companies comply with regulations before they run afoul of labor laws



U.S. Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta said his department won't be any less rigorous in punishing companies that flout regulations. PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE GETTY IMAGES

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. Labor Department said Tuesday that it is creating an office to better help companies comply with regulations before finding they have run afoul of labor laws, which policy watchers called a change in tone from an Obama-era emphasis on enforcement.

The responsibilities of the Office of Compliance Initiatives will include working with enforcement agencies to improve their effectiveness and use of data, as well as increasing outreach to both employers and employees to prevent violations, the department said in a statement. One of the first initiatives is a website to help companies understand their responsibilities and a revamped site for workers on their rights.

The OCI's work will also include "facilitating and encouraging a culture that promotes compliance assistance within the department," according to the statement.

Many in the business community have said the Labor Department under President Barack Obama overstressed the need for aggressive enforcement.

"Coming out of the last administration, we did not see a culture of compliance assistance," said Marc Freedman, vice president of workplace policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. He said the Obama administration aimed to "scare employers into doing the right thing." He cited as an example the so-called "regulation by shaming" that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration used to pressure companies it was investigating.

Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta was set to announce the new office in a speech at a conference in Nashville, Tenn., hosted by the Voluntary Protection Programs Participants' Association, a group of employers that aim to abide by workplace standards above those required by law.

In a statement ahead of the speech, Mr. Acosta said the creation of the OCI doesn't mean the Labor Department will be any less rigorous in punishing companies that flout regulations.

"Vigorous enforcement and compliance assistance go hand in hand," Mr. Acosta said. "The Office of Compliance Initiatives expands our efforts to promote full compliance with federal labor law."

Still, David Weil, who headed the department's Wage and Hour Division under Mr. Obama, said the focus on a shift in culture could be seen as a signal that enforcement is less of a priority.

"What worries me," he said, "is that is to say, 'Listen, you career-enforcement people: Back off. What we're about is not enforcement. We're about compliance assistance.'"

The department is testing at least one voluntary compliance program already. In March, it announced a pilot program allowing employers that have violated minimum-wage and overtime laws to voluntarily report those infractions to the federal government and avoid civil penalties.

The Labor Department said the OCI will be funded with existing resources and won't take any funds away from enforcement agencies or other offices or initiatives. It will fall under the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy.