

Discounted Lives

How we did the story:

Total Project: approximately 4 ½ months to complete.

I first got interested into fines levied by OSHA, after covering a Charleston, SC fire that killed nine firemen. While OSHA, and several federal agencies found significant violations with the way the department handled the fire, OSHA negotiated a fine worth only \$3,160. The initial fine was \$9,325. The day OSHA released its initial fine, a fireman called me to complain that those nine firemen's deaths would not initiate change with such a small monetary fine.

I then read archived articles when OSHA repeatedly reduced fines through either settlement agreements or through something called, an employment penalty option, which allows OSHA to reduce a monetary fine if the company promises to make its workplace safer.

At the beginning of 2007, I requested four years worth of accident data investigated by the state's OSHA office. The state's OSHA office implements and enforces the same policies set by Congress.

Information on more than 300 accidents was faxed over in about a month. I then manually put the information into a computer spreadsheet.

I quickly found some of the data to have incomplete accident information. Some accidents were missing, or did not have all of the information.

The information also did not contain the initial and final fine amount. I manually looked up those figures on osha.gov's website, but also quickly found either the state's office or the federal office did not keep up with accident information, even months after the state closes accident investigation. It took at least three months verifying the information with S.C. OSHA's office to make sure the initial and current fines were correct.

While waiting for information, I contacted family members through information obtained on the accident reporters and through county coroner's reports.

After interviewing family members, I also found that I could get information on their family members' death easier than they could. The blamed the state's OSHA office for not getting them requested information. They were also upset that companies never apologized, offered any insight into the accident, or were notified if there were hearings involved in the accidents that involved their loved one's death.