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Seferino Francisco Guadalupe holds an X-ray showing the screws that surgeons inserted to repair his shattered ankle. The injury happened in an accident at a House of Raeford plant in 2006. House of Raeford failed to record Guadalupe's fracture on its injury logs, as required by law. The company said it was an isolated incident.

## Company says it strives for a safe workplace

Poultry from 2XX

said her boss didn't like "repeat complainers."

For five years until spring 2005, Villegas hired workers and translated for Spanish-speaking employees. She shared an office with the plant medical director and said as many as 20 workers a day came in saying their hands, wrists and arms hurt.

She said she urged plant managers to send injured employees to a doctor, but they often refused. "They'd say, 'Belem, if they keep coming to the office, they're going to have to be let go.'"

Workers got the message. "You complain and you become unemployed," Villegas said.

House of Raeford didn't respond to questions about Villegas' allegations. The company said it fired her because she was "accepting money to provide employment favors to potential employees." Villegas denied the claim and said she believes she was fired, in part, because she started speaking up for workers.

The Observer interviewed more than 50 workers no longer employed at House of Raeford. Ten said they were fired after reporting injuries.

Company officials said workers are required to tell supervisors if they are hurt and that they will be sent to plant first-aid stations, or outside doctors if need be. They also noted that plants are represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and that its representatives have "full grievance procedures at their disposal." Local union officials said membership is less than 30 percent at some plants because immigrants are often reluctant to join, making it difficult to enact change.

"Certainly, we work hard to run a safe and healthy workplace, and to comply with all state and federal laws," Barry Cronin, complex manager of the Greenville plant, said in a written response. "...If any supervisor is discouraging employees from reporting injuries, that supervisor is in violation of company policy."

Carolina Cruz said her pleas for help were repeatedly ignored. A young mother, Cruz took a job at the Greenville plant in 2003 cutting chicken wings. After her hands started to throb, she said, she went to a company nurse who several times gave her ointment and sent her back to the line. "They don't help us at all," she said.

By the summer of 2006, she said, "My bones hurt .... If I continue like this, my hands are going to get to the point where I won't be able to do anything."

Cruz later left the plant. House of Raeford declined to comment on many of the workers' specific allegations, saying that, without signed releases, it was unable to discuss details of their health or employment. In gen-

### Concealing dangerous conditions

During the past decade, regulators have cited more than 50 poultry plants for failing to properly record workplace injuries. Some examples:

- 1 Gold'n Plump Poultry, Arcadia, Wis.**  
Inspectors in 2004 cited the company for failing to record several cases in which employees suffered hearing loss.
- 2 Trinity Valley Foods, Irving, Tex.**  
Firefighters in 2005 had to administer oxygen to at least two employees after a liquid nitrogen leak. Those injuries weren't recorded on the logs, OSHA found.
- 3 Marshall Durbin, Hattiesburg, Miss. \***  
OSHA concluded in 2003 the company had created an environment where employees felt dissuaded from reporting injuries. Most went to their own doctor or to the emergency room at their own cost. The company also failed to record some injuries and keep records of all visits to the safety coordinator.
- 4 House of Raeford Farms, Raeford, N.C.**  
N.C. regulators concluded in 1998 that the plant had crossed at least 35 names off injury logs.

\*OSHA cited the company for a record-keeping violation but deleted the citation as part of a settlement. The company disagreed with OSHA's characterizations and said there was no practice or pattern of discouraging employees from reporting injuries.



### OSHA AND WORKPLACE INJURIES

#### What should be recorded on OSHA injury and illness logs?

Companies should record significant work-related injuries and illnesses, including those that result in death, days away from work, restricted work or job transfers, and medical treatment beyond first aid.

#### Which companies does OSHA target for inspection?

OSHA targets companies reporting higher-than-average injury rates. However, the agency rarely checks whether companies are reporting honestly - and checks the accuracy of

only a small percentage of injury logs, which are kept at plants.

#### How often do regulators cite companies for underreporting?

Citations for underreporting have dropped sharply since 1990, when state and federal OSHA agencies cited employers for record-keeping violations more than 10,000 times. More than 100 of those citations were for poultry processors.

In 2006, the total number of citations was less than 4,000 and fewer than 10 were for poultry processors. OSHA says the drop is partly due to a policy change in the 1990s that allowed companies to

fix minor paperwork violations to avoid a citation.

#### How does OSHA monitor whether companies are telling the truth?

OSHA conducts occasional audits of injury logs. But Bob Whitmore, an OSHA expert on injury records, said the agency's once-aggressive focus on enforcing record-keeping regulations "fell off the radar screen in 1990 and never returned."

One example: An Observer review of nine years of OSHA audits showed most lasted one day. Whitmore said they should take a week or more to catch "significant and fraudulent problems."

SOURCES: OSHA, Observer research

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eral, the company said it found "many inaccuracies" in the information workers provided to the Observer but declined to elaborate.

"The allegations made by these former employees do not fairly or accurately represent the policies or management practices of House of Raeford Farms," the company wrote.

#### Injuries not reported

If House of Raeford's records are accurate, the company in recent years has operated some of the nation's safest chicken and turkey plants.

Businesses are required to record most serious injuries and illnesses on U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration logs. But it's an honor system, and companies must give logs to regulators and employees only if asked. Regulators use the logs to spot troubling workplace safety trends.

The newspaper obtained four years of logs for company plants in Greenville, West Columbia and Raeford.

In a sampling of workers in neighborhoods surrounding the plants, the Observer confirmed 31 injuries serious enough to be recorded for regulators. In 12 of those cases, the injuries didn't show up on logs.

Seferino Guadalupe was driving a machine moving pallets of turkey breasts at one of the company's two Raeford plants in November 2006 when, he said, the brakes failed and he crashed into a wall. Surgeons inserted screws to repair his shattered ankle.

Bernestine Wright said her hands

went numb after months of cutting chickens into bite-sized pieces at the Greenville plant. She said a company nurse refused to send her to a doctor when she complained about pains.

The pain grew so intense, she said, she visited a doctor and received painkillers. She was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome in 2005, according to the law firm that represented her in a workers' compensation case.

Lucas Hernandez cut his arm with a knife in summer 2005 while on the production line at the West Columbia plant. He missed work the next two days because of pain, he said.

None of those injuries showed up on House of Raeford injury logs.

In addition to the 31 injuries the Observer confirmed, 10 more workers described serious injuries that weren't recorded, but the newspaper could not confirm their medical treatment.

Whitmore, the OSHA record-keeping expert, examined House of Raeford logs and details of the 41 injuries the Observer found. He concluded the company violated workplace safety law by failing to record more than half of those injuries.

"These are severe, serious, debilitating cases," Whitmore said.

Company officials said they follow OSHA rules for recording injuries, and are unaware of any work-related injuries being excluded from the logs. Lewis, the company's safety director, said he couldn't explain why Guadalupe's accident wasn't included and called it "an isolated case." He said the

company has corrected its logs.

Company officials said Wright's allegations are inaccurate but wouldn't elaborate.

At the West Columbia plant, safety manager Mike Flowers said that because Hernandez stayed home on his own and did not call his supervisor, managers didn't know the extent of his injury. "There's a lot of gray area," Flowers said.



Flowers

Nonsense, said Whitmore. "The supervisor knew there was an injury. The person missed work and it was because of pain related to an injury," he said. "It was clearly recordable. Period."

#### Record-keeping questioned

Poultry plants are filled with hazards. On one side of the factory, employees grab live birds before hanging them upside down on moving hooks that whisk them off for slaughter. On the other side - after the birds are scalded, plucked and chilled - they're hurried along production lines where workers stand shoulder-to-shoulder wielding blades for hours with few breaks.

Temperatures hover near freezing to prevent the spread of bacteria. Water drips off machinery, falling onto floors slick with chicken fat. The din of clanking conveyor belts makes conversation nearly impossible.

The conditions are ripe for musculo-

### Federal safety data misleading, experts say

Federal statistics suggest poultry plants are safer than ever. But experts question those numbers.

In October, the U.S. Labor Department reported fewer poultry workers were hurt in 2006 than in any previous year. The government cited an injury and illness rate of **6.6 per 100** workers, compared with **17.8 in 1996**.

The National Chicken Council praised poultry processors for adopting an "emphasis on safety, new and redesigned equipment and processes, early intervention, and other measures...."

But Bob Whitmore, a longtime Labor Department record-keeping expert, said the poultry industry's injury and illness rate is likely two to three times higher because of underreporting. He's particularly suspicious of OSHA records showing no injuries at some poultry plants. He said the government has done little to crack down on companies that undercount injuries.

Rich Fairfax, OSHA's enforcement director, said inspectors look for underreporting but rarely find it: "When we try to track it down, it goes nowhere."

Here are the 2006 rates of injuries and illnesses per 100 workers:

7.7	Motor vehicle parts manufacturing
7.5	Furniture manufacturing
6.6	Poultry processing
6.0	All manufacturing
4.4	All private industry
4.4	Textile mills
2.4	Pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing
2.0	Computer and electronic product manufacturing

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

### Safer than a toy store?

Workplace safety experts also question a reported drop in musculoskeletal disorders. In 2006, **20.8 of every 10,000** poultry workers missed work because of MSDs, down from **88.3 in 1996**, according to the Labor Department.

That 2006 rate would make poultry plants safer than toy stores. "It's intuitively implausible," said Dr. Michael Silverstein, a former OSHA policy chief. "Something is clearly wrong."

Here are the rates of MSDs resulting in lost time, per 10,000 workers:

47.4	Hobby, toy and game stores
38.6	Average for all industries
27.5	New car dealers
25.9	Pharmacies
20.8	Poultry processing

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

— AMES ALEXANDER AND KERRY HALL



Mabe

Two said they had surgery for carpal tunnel at company expense. Most of the others said they complained to company officials about their injuries but weren't sent to doctors or given time off from work - steps that

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"...If any supervisor is discouraging employees from reporting injuries, that supervisor is in violation of company policy."

BARRY CRONIN, COMPLEX MANAGER OF THE GREENVILLE, S.C., PLANT  
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