

Amid criticism of workplace injuries, Amazon signs a new safety pledge

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Facing union drives, citations from state workplace regulators, lawsuits and shareholder pressure to reduce injuries, Amazon signed on to a new safety pledge Thursday.

The next step in its five-year, \$12 million partnership with the nonprofit National Safety Council, the pledge is a commitment to reduce musculoskeletal risks and injuries by 25% by 2025. Also known as MSDs, [musculoskeletal disorders](#) are ergonomic injuries like back, shoulder and wrist pain that are often caused by repetitive movements, awkward postures or heavy lifting. More than 15 companies have signed on to the MSD Pledge, including Amazon, United Airlines, Cummins and John Deere.

"Safety is integral to everything we do at Amazon," Heather MacDougall, [vice president](#) for workplace health and [safety](#) at Amazon, told the crowd Thursday at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. "We know that it takes more than monetary investments to achieve safety excellence. It takes an unwavering commitment to relentlessly monitor progress and to continuously improve."

Amazon workers and activist groups have said the company's "quota" system—standards for how many packages an employee will pick, pack, stow or deliver in one shift—leads to a pace of work that is unsafe and often unsustainable. Washington state's Department of Labor and Industries first cited Amazon for unsafe working conditions at its Dupont, Pierce County, facility in May 2021, connecting the pace of work to a high rate of injury. The department has now issued four citations to Amazon.

MacDougall said Thursday it was a "misconception" that Amazon has quotas for its workforce.

Amazon has already committed to go beyond the MSD Pledge and

reduce musculoskeletal injuries by 40% by 2025, MacDougall said.

She said the company did see an increase in injuries among its workforce last year, adding that the jump was a result of having to quickly train new hires to meet the demand for online shopping amid the pandemic.

Amazon has previously maintained that its rate of injury was decreasing. It released a report this year that compared data from 2019 and 2020, and found that injury rates improved 43%.

A report from a coalition of labor unions, the Strategic Organizing Center, analyzed more recent injury data Amazon had submitted to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration comparing 2020 and 2021, and found injury rates at Amazon warehouses went up 20%. A second report found injury rates for delivery drivers went up nearly 40%.

MacDougall said Thursday that Amazon has a "safety flywheel" that includes three categories: investment, innovation and improvement. On top of that, it's "critically important to listen to our employees," she said.

"At Amazon, we are committed to doing that often and doing it well," MacDougall said. "We value honest feedback and we use this to continually improve our worksites. Every employee must have confidence in the safety of their work environments."

Earlier this year, a group of workers at a Staten Island warehouse voted to form the first union at an Amazon facility in the United States. Leaders from Amazon Labor Union have said they are asking the company for [higher wages](#), better medical leave, more breaks throughout the day and the end of productivity requirements during each shift.

At that Staten Island facility, injury rates increased 15% from 2020 to 2021, according to the Strategic Organizing Center. The injury rate at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, where workers are still waiting to hear the results of a union election, increased 43% last year.

The serious [injury](#) rate at Amazon warehouses overall in 2021 was 6.8 per 100 workers, compared to a rate of 3.3 per 100 at non-Amazon warehouses, according to the report. Amazon employees needed an average of 19 more days to recover.

Musculoskeletal disorders can cost employers billions of dollars in lost wages, compensation and productivity, Lorraine Martin, president and CEO for the National Safety Council, told the group gathered to sign on to the pledge Thursday.

"MSDs just don't go away at the end of a shift," she continued, adding that the injuries can lead to disability and [early retirement](#) or make it difficult for workers to walk their dog, unload groceries or dance at a wedding.

Gary Allread, program director for SRI-Ergonomics, a branch of The Ohio State University's Spine Research Institute, said companies committed to improving safety need to focus on employee engagement and buy-in. "If it's just lip service, then employees are going to see through that," he said.

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