

# Voluntary Protection Programs: Star vs. Merit

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) designed the Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) to recognize workplaces showing excellence in safety and health (S&H). Workplaces interested in VPP recognition must establish an effective safety management system (SMS) and meet OSHA's requirements for VPP participation. This one pager summarizes OSHA's guiding VPP principles and two levels of VPP recognition.



## BLUF:

Never set an organizational goal to reach Merit recognition...always reach for VPP Star!

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## OSHA'S GUIDING VPP PRINCIPLES

Workplaces submit a VPP application to apply for OSHA's recognition program. OSHA reviews the application and schedules an on-site evaluation. During this evaluation, applicants must:

- **Demonstrate they are a leader in S&H and show commitment to an effective SMS.** The SMS must be performance-based and support organizational needs.
- **Show established relationships between management, labor, and OSHA.** Ongoing communication and cooperation are essential to support the SMS. Sites represented by a bargaining unit require documented union support.
- **Focus on continuous improvement of the SMS.** Efforts involve sustaining implemented business practices and processes, with a continual focus to improve workplace S&H.

An on-site assessment team evaluates the applicant's SMS. Applicants must meet all the Minimum Requirements (MRs) listed in the [Site-Based Participation Evaluation Report](#) to obtain any level of VPP recognition. Upon conclusion of the evaluation, the OSHA Regional and National Offices coordinate recommendations regarding VPP approval. The site waits for official notification from the National Office to learn their recognition status.

**Star is the most coveted level of VPP recognition. Star needs to be your organization's goal when submitting a VPP application.** If your SMS falls short of Star quality for any reason, OSHA may grant you a temporary Merit recognition, or no recognition status at all. Read about the differences of Star and Merit on the next page.

## STAR RECOGNITION

OSHA grants Star recognition to workplaces demonstrating a world-class SMS. This best-of-the-best recognition status means the workplace has:

- Effective processes in place supporting all VPP criteria
- Injury and illness rates below the industry average
- A focus on continuous improvement
- An established safety culture embracing S&H as a priority and has S&H integrated into daily work practices.



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OSHA periodically assesses the workplace to ensure all aspects of the SMS continue to operate at Star quality, completed through VPP self-evaluations the workplace prepares and submits to OSHA annually (due Feb.15) and during on-site reapproval evaluations (every 3–5 years).

## MERIT RECOGNITION

OSHA may grant Merit recognition to workplaces with an SMS not meeting all VPP requirements. Merit workplaces have:

- A lack of effective processes to support all the VPP criteria and/or
- Injury and illness rates at or above the industry average.

OSHA issues Merit recognition on a case-by-case basis, typically to workplaces:

- Demonstrating a commitment to implementing and sustaining a world-class SMS
- Capable of feasibly reducing injury and illness rates below the industry average in two (2) years, if applicable
- Able to meet OSHA-issued Merit goals to improve one or more SMS elements falling short of Star quality within two (2) years
- Possessing the resources and motivation to achieve VPP Star recognition and continue to operate the SMS at Star quality.



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**Merit recognition is a temporary status.** OSHA determines the length of time a workplace may hold Merit recognition – up to a maximum of three (3) years. The objective of Merit recognition is to help workplaces reach VPP Star recognition within the allotted timeframe.

Moving from Merit to Star recognition is based on meeting all Merit goals, having injury and illness rates below the industry average, and having all aspects of the SMS operating at Star quality. Workplaces failing to achieve all these expectations may be requested by OSHA to withdraw from VPP participation. Therefore, it is always best to shoot for VPP Star recognition the first time!

For additional information on the SMCX's services or your VPP journey, please visit the SMCX-hosted website: <https://www.smscx.org/>.