

# Legal Research Report: California Workers' Compensation DWC Trials, Trial Briefs, and Trial Witnesses

## (PART-A INJURED WORKERS ANALYSIS)

March 1, 2026

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# CALIFORNIA WORKERS' COMPENSATION TRIALS: TRIAL BRIEFS AND TRIAL WITNESSES

This report explains how workers' compensation trials work in California, how to prepare a trial brief, and how to use witness testimony effectively. If you were injured at work and your case is heading to trial before the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board (WCAB) — the state agency that decides disputes about work injuries — this guide will help you understand the process, your rights, and what to expect.

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## Part 1: Overview and Key Findings

### What This Report Covers

California's workers' compensation system uses administrative hearings — less formal proceedings than regular court trials — governed by the California Labor Code, Division 4, §§ 3200–6000 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5)) and the California Code of Regulations, Title 8, §§ 10400–10825 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/articles.html>). These rules prioritize efficiency while protecting your right to a fair hearing.

### Key Findings

The California workers' compensation trial system works in two main stages: a mandatory settlement conference (MSC) — a required meeting where both sides try to resolve the case — followed by a contested hearing (trial) if settlement fails. Discovery (the process of gathering and sharing evidence) closes at the MSC stage under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10757 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/articles.html>).

Trial briefs — written documents summarizing your facts, legal arguments, and evidence — are not required by law but are strongly recommended. Witness testimony can be given live at trial, through deposition transcripts (sworn testimony taken before trial and written down), or through written statements under relaxed evidence rules found in Cal. Lab. Code § 5708 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5708](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5708)).

Your burden of proof — the level of evidence you must present to win — is preponderance of the evidence. This means your evidence must be more convincing and more likely true than the opposing side's evidence. You do not need to prove your case beyond all doubt, only that it is more probable than not. This standard comes from Cal. Lab. Code § 3202.5 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5)).

### Risk Assessment

Your chances at trial depend on several factors:

- Credibility of your testimony — Does the judge believe you?
- Medical evidence — Do your medical records support your claimed injuries?
- Causation narrative — Can you clearly explain how work caused your injury?
- Procedural compliance — Did you follow all filing and evidence rules?

**Important: The California Court of Appeal ruled in *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>) that violations of evidence discovery rules are strictly enforced and cannot be excused as "harmless error." This means breaking procedural rules can cause you to lose even if your evidence is strong.**

### Your Strategic Options

As an injured worker facing trial, you have four main paths:

- Settle before trial to avoid the risks of a hearing
- Request an expedited hearing if your injury is accepted but you dispute treatment or temporary disability benefits
- Prepare fully for trial with organized witnesses, medical experts, and a strong trial brief

- Certify legal questions to the WCAB if your case raises a new or unresolved legal issue rather than a factual dispute

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## Part 2: Important Timelines and Deadlines

### Key Deadlines You Must Know

Once you or your attorney files a Declaration of Readiness to Proceed — a form telling the WCAB you are ready for a hearing — specific deadlines begin. You can find guidance on filing this form from the DWC Injured Worker Guide (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dwc/iwguides/IWGuide05.pdf>).

Procedural Stage	Deadline	What You Must Do
Declaration of Readiness filed	When you are ready	Signals readiness; requests hearing type
Mandatory Settlement Conference	Within 30 days of Declaration	Discovery closes; file pre-trial conference statement; attend in person with settlement authority
Trial (if no settlement)	Within 75 days of Declaration	Present all evidence and witnesses
Judge's Decision	Within 30 days after trial ends	Judge issues written decision
Petition for Reconsideration	Within 20 days of receiving decision	File if you disagree with the decision
WCAB rules on Petition	Within 60 days of petition filing	The WCAB panel reviews the judge's decision
Writ of Review (appeal)	Within 45 days of WCAB decision	File with the California Court of Appeal

The entire process — from filing the Declaration of Readiness to a final WCAB decision — typically takes four to six months. Delays in obtaining a Qualified Medical Evaluator (QME) — a neutral doctor assigned to evaluate your injury — can extend this timeline significantly.

### The 90-Day Presumption Rule

Cal. Lab. Code § 5402

([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402)) provides a powerful advantage for injured workers. If your employer fails to deny your claim within 90 days after you file your claim form, your injury is presumed compensable — meaning it is assumed to be a valid work injury. The employer must then prove the injury was not work-related, rather than you having to prove it was. You should confirm the date you filed your claim form and whether the employer issued a timely denial.

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## Part 3: Legal Framework Governing Trials

### Statutes That Control Your Case

California's workers' compensation system operates under Division 4 of the California Labor Code (§§ 3200–6000) (<https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codesdisplaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5>), with procedural rules in Division 5 (§§ 5000–5808). The WCAB gets its authority from Cal. Lab. Code § 5307 (<https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codesdisplaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5307>), which grants the Board "all judicial powers vested by law in the division of workers' compensation." This includes the power to decide whether your injury happened at work, how disabled you are, and what benefits you should receive.

### How Trials Are Conducted

Trial procedures follow Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10787 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10787.html>), which requires that "parties shall submit for decision all matters properly in issue at a single trial and produce at the trial all necessary evidence, including witnesses, documents, medical reports, payroll statements and all other matters considered essential in the proof of a party's claim or defense." The judge prefers to hear everything

at one hearing, though bifurcated trials — splitting the case into separate hearings on different issues — are allowed for good cause.

### **Evidence Rules Are More Flexible Than Regular Court**

Workers' compensation trials follow more relaxed evidence rules than civil court trials. Cal. Lab. Code § 5709 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5709](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5709)) states that "no informality in any proceeding or in the manner of taking testimony shall invalidate any order, decision, award or rule." This means the judge can consider evidence that a regular court might exclude.

Hearsay — a statement made outside of court offered to prove the truth of what was said — is admissible under Cal. Lab. Code § 5708 (<https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codesdisplaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5708>) if it is "the sort of evidence on which responsible persons are accustomed to rely in the conduct of serious affairs." However, under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10114.1 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/101141.html>), if the other side objects, hearsay alone cannot support a finding — you need additional evidence to back it up.

### **Documentary Evidence Rules**

Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10670 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10670.html>) establishes that certified copies of government agency reports are admissible instead of originals. The judge may refuse to accept documents not listed on your Pre-Trial Conference Statement or not shared at the MSC, unless you show good cause. All physician reports must comply with Cal. Lab. Code § 4628 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628)), which requires specific content and a declaration under penalty of perjury.

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## **Part 4: Recent Legal Developments Affecting Your Trial**

### **2025 WCAB En Banc Decisions**

The WCAB has issued important decisions in 2025 that change how trials work. En banc decisions are rulings by the full Board that serve as binding precedent — meaning all judges must follow them.

In *Tyson Perez v. Chicago Dogs, Liberty Mutual Insurance Co.*, 2025-EB-02 (WCAB Aug. 14, 2025) ([https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab\\_enbanc.htm](https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab_enbanc.htm)), the Board ruled that electronic testimony (by video) should be "readily permitted" when a witness cannot appear in person. If a request for video testimony is made on the record at the start of the hearing, and the other side has a chance to respond, this satisfies procedural requirements. This is good news if your witnesses live far away or cannot travel.

In *Abel Vasquez v. Inocensio Renteria; Zenith Insurance Co.*, 2025-EB-01 (WCAB May 19, 2025) ([https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab\\_enbanc.htm](https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab_enbanc.htm)), the Board established that only the WCAB can decide whether a replacement QME panel is valid. If you plan to rely on QME evidence, you must follow proper panel procedures before trial.

In *Jillian DiFusco v. Hands On Spa*, 2025-EB-03 (WCAB Oct. 13, 2025) ([https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab\\_enbanc.htm](https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab_enbanc.htm)), the Board required that all parties, representatives, and insurance companies be fully identified in all filings.

### **The DPR Construction Decision: Strict Discovery Rules**

The most significant recent case is *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>). The Third District Court of Appeal made two critical rulings:

- Discovery closure is absolute. Under Cal. Lab. Code § 5502(d)(3) ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5502](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5502)), evidence not listed in your pre-trial conference statement can be excluded — and this exclusion cannot be treated as "harmless error."
- Credibility findings do not need detailed explanations. Judges must state the reasons for their decisions under Cal. Lab. Code § 5313 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5313](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5313)), but they do not need to analyze witness demeanor in detail. They must only explain the basis for their ultimate factual findings.

***Critical: The court stated that "disregard for the statutory procedural mechanisms for resolving workers' compensation cases is inappropriate" and "such disregard is not subject to harmless error analysis." This means even if improperly admitted evidence would not have changed the outcome, its admission can result in the decision being reversed.***

### Expedited Hearings

For cases where your injury is accepted but you dispute treatment or temporary disability, Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10782 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10782.html>) allows expedited hearings — faster proceedings designed to resolve limited issues quickly. The judge decides whether your case qualifies.

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## Part 5: Trial Witnesses — Types and Requirements

### Who Can Testify at Your Trial

You can present several types of witnesses at a workers' compensation trial. Understanding each type helps you build the strongest case.

**Eyewitnesses to the Injury.** These are people who directly saw the accident happen — a coworker who watched you fall, a supervisor present when equipment broke, or a customer who witnessed the incident. Their testimony is valuable because it provides direct observation of how the injury occurred. Eyewitnesses do not need special qualifications; any person who saw the event can testify about what they observed.

**Character and Habit Witnesses.** Coworkers and supervisors can testify about your work habits, safety practices, and general workplace behavior before the injury. This helps counter any employer claim that you were careless. For example, a supervisor can confirm that you consistently followed safety rules and attended training.

**After-the-Fact Witnesses.** People who did not see the injury happen but observed your condition immediately afterward or inspected the scene shortly after. This includes paramedics who responded to the emergency, managers who checked the area, and security staff who reviewed the scene. Paramedics are especially valuable because they can describe your pain level and what you told them about how the injury happened.

**Treating Physicians.** Your doctor or other healthcare providers who examined and treated you are powerful witnesses. They can testify about your reported injury history, their examination findings, their diagnosis, whether work caused the injury, and your prognosis. Their reports must comply with Cal. Lab. Code § 4628 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628)) and include a declaration under penalty of perjury.

**Qualified Medical Evaluators (QMEs).** These are neutral medical experts selected from panels established by the WCAB. QME testimony is valued for its neutrality. QME reports must comply with Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10685 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10685.html>) and include detailed descriptions of evaluation methods and causation opinions.

**Vocational Rehabilitation Experts.** If you claim permanent disability, vocational experts can testify about your ability to work, transferable skills, and retraining needs. Under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10685 (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/regulations/california/8-CCR-10685>), the WCAB prefers vocational expert evidence in written report form.

**Industrial Hygienists and Safety Experts.** For occupational disease cases or complex industrial injuries, these experts can testify about workplace hazards, exposure levels, or safety protocols.

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## Part 6: Witness Credibility and Preparation

### How Judges Evaluate Witness Credibility

Under Cal. Lab. Code § 5313 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5313](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5313)), the workers' compensation judge considers these factors when deciding whether to believe a witness:

- Opportunity to observe — Was the witness in a position to see or know what happened?

- Clarity of memory — Does the witness remember details clearly?
- Consistency with other evidence — Does the testimony match medical records and documents?
- Bias or interest — Does the witness have a reason to favor one side?
- Reasonableness — Does the testimony make sense given common experience?
- Demeanor — How does the witness communicate and present themselves?

**Important: In *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>), the court emphasized that the applicant's testimony was deemed unreliable because it conflicted with medical records. The applicant testified he never had prior shoulder pain, but medical records from 2013–2015 showed earlier shoulder treatment. This kind of contradiction can seriously damage your case.**

### How to Prepare as a Witness (Applicant)

Your attorney will prepare you for both direct examination — questions from your own attorney — and cross-examination — questions from the employer's attorney.

During direct examination, focus on:

- Clearly describing your job duties and work environment
- Giving a detailed account of how the injury happened, including timing and immediate symptoms
- Explaining how the injury affects your work and daily life
- Speaking in plain language — avoid medical or legal jargon

During cross-examination, expect the employer's attorney to:

- Ask about any prior injuries or medical conditions
- Point out delays between the injury and when you sought treatment
- Identify activities outside of work that could explain your condition
- Highlight any differences between your testimony and your medical records
- Challenge your claims about permanent limitations

**Important: Answer only the question asked. Do not volunteer extra information. If you do not remember something, say so honestly rather than guessing.**

### Preparing Other Witnesses

Coworker witnesses should recall the date and time of the incident, what they personally observed, any unsafe conditions, your immediate reaction, and any statements you made right after the injury. Tell them to stick to their own observations and not speculate about medical matters.

Medical witnesses should review all medical records, be ready to explain the injury mechanism in simple terms, anticipate alternative causation theories the defense may raise, and explain their findings without unnecessary technical language.

### Electronic and Deposition Testimony

Witness testimony can be presented live, through deposition transcripts read into the record, or through written statements. Under *Tyson Perez v. Chicago Dogs*, 2025-EB-02 (WCAB Aug. 14, 2025) ([https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab\\_enbanc.htm](https://www.dir.ca.gov/wcab/wcab_enbanc.htm)), electronic testimony by video is readily permitted when a witness cannot appear in person and the request is made on the record at the start of the hearing. Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10800 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10800.html>) governs how hearing testimony is transcribed.

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## Part 7: Writing Your Trial Brief

### What Is a Trial Brief?

A trial brief is a written document you submit to the judge summarizing your case — your facts, your legal arguments, and how the evidence proves your claim. Trial briefs are not required by law in California workers' compensation cases, but they are strongly recommended because they help the judge understand your position. A trial brief is different from a pre-trial conference statement, which only lists your evidence and witnesses.

Trial briefs should not exceed 15 pages and should be organized with clear headings under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10787 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10787.html>), consistent with general briefing standards referenced in Cal. R. Ct. 3.1113 ([https://courts.ca.gov/cms/rules/index/three/rule3\\_1113](https://courts.ca.gov/cms/rules/index/three/rule3_1113)).

### How to Organize Your Trial Brief

**Section 1 — Statement of Facts.** Tell the story of your injury in a clear, chronological narrative. Connect every fact to evidence you will present at trial. For example:

> "On July 15, 2023, Applicant was employed as a warehouse worker at Company X in Oakland. His job duties included moving boxes weighing up to 50 pounds from the loading dock to storage shelves. On July 15, while moving a box, Applicant felt a sharp pain in his lower back. He immediately reported the injury to his supervisor, Manager Jones, and was sent to emergency care. Dr. Smith documented that Applicant reported acute lower back pain with radiation to the left leg, consistent with a lumbar strain."

Every fact should be traceable to a specific piece of trial evidence — a medical report, witness statement, or employment record.

**Section 2 — Statement of Law.** Cite the legal rules that apply to your case. Focus on:

- Cal. Lab. Code § 3202.5 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3202.5)) — Preponderance of evidence standard
- Cal. Lab. Code § 5402 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402)) — 90-day presumption of compensability
- Any relevant court decisions on causation or credibility

Keep this section to one or two pages.

**Section 3 — Argument.** Apply the facts to the law. Organize your arguments by issue:

1. You have proved your injury was work-related. Point to your testimony, treating physician reports, and objective medical findings (imaging, examination results) that together show, more likely than not, that work caused your injury.
2. The presumption of compensability applies. If the employer did not deny the claim within 90 days under Cal. Lab. Code § 5402 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402)), state that the injury is presumed compensable and the employer has not rebutted that presumption.
3. You are entitled to benefits. Based on medical evidence, specify what benefits you are requesting — temporary disability, permanent disability, medical treatment, or vocational rehabilitation.

Reference specific exhibits by number: "Exhibit 5, Dr. Smith's Medical Report, April 10, 2024, page 2."

### Strategic Framing Tips

Your trial brief is your chance to tell the most persuasive version of your story. Focus on:

- A clear connection: work activity → injury → immediate medical treatment → consistent diagnosis
- Consistency between your testimony and medical records
- Corroboration from witnesses and documents created at the time of injury

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## Part 8: Arguments For and Against Your Claim

### Arguments That Support Your Position

**Argument 1 — Presumption of Compensability.** If your employer did not deny your claim within 90 days of your filing under Cal. Lab. Code § 5402 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5402)), your injury is presumed to be work-related. The employer must then prove it was not. Establish this early at trial by confirming when you filed your claim form and that no timely denial was issued. Strength: Strong, if supported by documentation.

**Argument 2 — Credible Testimony Backed by Medical Evidence.** If you testify clearly and consistently about how the injury happened, and your treating physician's reports confirm your account, this creates a strong foundation. Lay testimony alone can establish causation for obvious injuries — for example, testifying that you fell at work and hurt your back does not require a medical expert under Cal. Lab. Code § 5708 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5708](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5708)). Strength: Strong, if testimony matches medical records.

**Argument 3 — Employer Accepted Benefits.** If the employer paid temporary disability or authorized medical treatment for your injury, this can be viewed as an implied admission that the injury is work-related. Strength: Moderate to Strong, depending on the extent and timing.

**Argument 4 — Contemporaneous Records Support Your Account.** Early medical reports, emergency room records, and supervisor incident reports created at the time of injury — before any legal dispute developed — carry high credibility. If your trial testimony aligns with these documents, your case is significantly strengthened. Strength: Strong to Moderate.

### Arguments the Employer May Use Against You

**Counter-Argument 1 — Medical Record Contradictions.** The employer's strongest tool is finding inconsistencies between your testimony and your medical history. In *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>), the applicant's credibility was severely damaged because he denied prior shoulder problems, but medical records showed earlier treatment. Strength: Moderate to Strong.

**Counter-Argument 2 — Non-Work Causes.** The employer may argue your condition was caused by aging, obesity, hobbies, or prior injuries unrelated to work. Strength: Moderate, especially if imaging shows degenerative conditions.

**Counter-Argument 3 — No Medical Expert on Causation.** For complex injuries (occupational disease, psychological injuries, cumulative trauma), you generally need a medical expert to explain how work caused the condition. Without expert testimony, the employer can argue causation is unproven. Strength: Strong, if medical complexity is evident but no expert supports you.

**Counter-Argument 4 — Procedural Defects.** Under current law, if your evidence was not listed in the pre-trial conference statement, the employer can move to exclude it. This exclusion is not subject to harmless error analysis per *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>). Strength: Moderate to Strong.

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## Part 9: Step-by-Step Trial Preparation

### Step 1 — The Mandatory Settlement Conference

After you file a Declaration of Readiness using the DWC form (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dwc/iwguides/IWGuide05.pdf>), the WCAB must schedule an MSC within 30 days.

You must file a Pre-Trial Conference Statement at or before the MSC, as required by Cal. Lab. Code § 5502 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5502](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5502)). This statement must include:

- Agreed facts (issues both sides acknowledge)
- Disputed issues (what you disagree about)
- A complete list of medical reports by date, provider, and page count
- Names of witnesses and their roles (eyewitness, medical expert, etc.)
- An exhibit list with brief descriptions
- Documentary evidence such as employment records, incident reports, and medical bills

***Critical: Under *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>), any evidence not listed in your pre-trial conference statement may be***

**excluded at trial, and this exclusion cannot be excused as harmless. List everything you might use — it is better to list documents you may not need than to have critical evidence excluded.**

Under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10752 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/articles.html>), you must attend the MSC in person if you are a represented injured worker. The insurance company must also have someone with settlement authority — the power to agree to a settlement — present at the hearing.

## Step 2 — Organize Your Medical Evidence

Compile all medical reports in chronological order. Label each by provider, date, and relevance. Ensure every report complies with Cal. Lab. Code § 4628 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=4628)), which requires:

- The provider's name and credentials
- A statement the report is for workers' compensation purposes
- A history of your complaint and injury mechanism
- Past medical history, examination findings, and diagnostic results
- Diagnosis with a clear connection to the work injury
- Treatment recommendations
- A declaration under penalty of perjury

Reports missing the declaration under penalty of perjury may be excluded under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10670 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10670.html>).

## Step 3 — Organize Documentary Evidence

Prepare these documents:

- Job description and work schedule
- Wage statements for six months before and after injury
- Medical expense invoices
- Temporary disability authorization forms
- Employer accident or incident reports
- Safety procedures relevant to your injury

Under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10670 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10670.html>), file copies — not originals — with the WCAB. Certified copies of government agency records (such as Social Security records) are admissible without requiring a live witness to verify them.

## Step 4 — Coordinate Your Witnesses

Identify and prepare every witness. Under Cal. Code Regs. tit. 8, § 10787 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/10787.html>), you must bring all witnesses to trial — live, by deposition transcript, or electronically. Prepare exhibit sets in order, clearly labeled and indexed.

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## Part 10: San Francisco Bay Area Specifics

### Hearing Locations

If you were injured in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma), your case will be handled by the San Francisco WCAB (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dwc/iwguides.html>). Primary locations include:

- San Francisco: 100 Montgomery Street, Suite 800, San Francisco, CA 94104
- San Francisco (alternate): 630 Sansome Street, 4th Floor, Room 475, San Francisco, CA 94111
- Concord (East Bay): 1855 Gateway Blvd., Suite 850, Concord, CA 94520

Case assignment is typically based on where the injury occurred. If traveling to your assigned location is difficult, you may request a venue change, but you must show good cause.

### Local Practice Notes

San Francisco judges tend to require detailed pre-trial conference statements that specifically identify medical reports by date and treating provider. Consistent with *DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)*, 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (3d Dist. 2025) (<https://www.sullivanoncomp.com/blog/3rd-district-court-of-appeal-clarifies-credibility-standards-and-discovery-closure-rules>), San Francisco judges strictly enforce discovery closure rules. You should not expect a continuance to obtain evidence you failed to list before the MSC.

### **Rights of Immigrant Workers**

Cal. Lab. Code § 5307

([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5307](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5307)) does not require citizenship for workers' compensation benefits. Non-citizens, including undocumented workers, are entitled to workers' compensation benefits if they meet the employment and injury requirements. This is different from many other benefit programs and is an important right to understand.

California requires employers to maintain workers' compensation insurance under Cal. Lab. Code § 3700 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3700](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=3700)). The insurance carrier — not the employer directly — defends against your claim and makes benefit decisions.

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## **Part 11: What to Do If You Lose at Trial**

### **Preserving Your Right to Appeal**

Even if the judge rules against you, you can take steps to protect your appeal rights under Cal. Lab. Code § 5900 ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5900](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=5900)). During trial:

- If evidence is excluded due to procedural defects, object on the record and note the exclusion
- If the judge applies the law incorrectly, reference the legal error in your testimony and filings
- If the judge makes credibility findings unsupported by evidence, highlight contradictions in the hearing minutes
- If procedural rules are violated, object and make sure the record reflects the violation

### **Filing a Petition for Reconsideration**

You must file a Petition for Reconsideration within 20 days of receiving the judge's decision. Your petition should specify:

- Whether you dispute the judge's factual findings
- Whether you dispute how the judge applied the law
- Any new evidence discovered after trial that was not available during trial
- Specific reasons the decision should be reconsidered

The WCAB has 60 days to grant or deny your petition.

### **Further Appeals**

If the WCAB denies reconsideration, you may file a Writ of Review with the California Court of Appeal within 45 days. The appellate court reviews whether the WCAB made a reasonable decision based on the record. Appellate courts rarely overturn factual findings but do review legal errors and procedural compliance.

If the Court of Appeal denies relief, you may petition the California Supreme Court for review, though the Court rarely accepts workers' compensation cases.

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# Legal Research Report: California Workers' Compensation DWC Trials, Trial Briefs, and Trial Witnesses

## (PART-B LEGAL ANALYSIS)

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## Executive Summary

This research report addresses the procedural framework, strategic considerations, and practical requirements governing California workers' compensation trials before the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board (WCAB), with particular emphasis on trial brief preparation and witness testimony management. California workers' compensation proceedings are administrative hearings conducted under a streamlined procedural system governed by [the Labor Code][1] and [California Code of Regulations, Title 8][2], which prioritize efficiency while maintaining due process protections.

**Key Findings:** The California workers' compensation trial system functions as a bifurcated administrative process consisting of mandatory settlement conferences followed by contested hearings, with discovery closing at the mandatory settlement conference stage[3]. Trial briefs are not statutorily required but are highly recommended as strategic documents summarizing facts, legal arguments, and evidence organization[4]. Witness testimony is permitted in live form at trial, through deposition transcripts, or through written statements under relaxed evidence rules that diverge substantially from civil litigation standards[5]. The burden of proof for applicants is preponderance of the evidence—meaning evidence that, when weighed against opposing evidence, has greater convincing force and probability of truth[6].

**Client Risk Assessment (Medium):** While the workers' compensation system is designed to be more accessible than civil litigation, trial outcomes depend significantly on credible testimony, adequate documentary evidence, and clear narrative framing. Recent precedent from the California Court of Appeal has clarified that procedural violations regarding evidence discovery are strictly enforced and not subject to harmless error analysis, meaning procedural compliance is not optional[7]. Success probability depends heavily on whether the applicant's testimony is deemed credible by the workers' compensation judge, whether medical evidence adequately supports claimed injuries, and whether the injury causation narrative is logically presented.

**Primary Strategic Options:** An injured worker facing trial may pursue: (1) aggressive settlement negotiation pre-trial to avoid evidentiary risks; (2) expedited hearing strategy for simpler cases where injury acceptance is not contested; (3) comprehensive trial preparation with detailed witness coordination and medical expert alignment; or (4) certification to the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board for legal question review rather than evidentiary challenges. Each strategy carries distinct risk profiles, timeline implications, and procedural consequences.

**Timeline/Deadline Considerations:** Once a Declaration of Readiness is filed, a mandatory settlement conference must be scheduled within 30 days[8]. If settlement fails, trial typically occurs within 75 days of the Declaration filing. The workers' compensation judge must issue a decision within 30 days of trial conclusion[9]. A Petition for Reconsideration must be filed within 20 days of decision receipt, after which the WCAB has 60 days to rule[10]. This entire process—from Declaration to final WCAB decision—typically spans four to six months, though QME (Qualified Medical Evaluator) delays can extend timelines significantly.

**Likelihood of Success (Qualitative Assessment - Medium to High with Significant Contingencies):** Success at trial depends on multiple factors with no single determinative element. The applicant carries the burden of proving every element of the claim by preponderance of the evidence, which is a moderate threshold—more likely than not, not beyond reasonable doubt[11]. However, if the employer fails to deny the claim within 90 days of the claim form filing, the injury is presumed compensable, shifting burden to the employer[12]. Medical evidence alignment is critical; contradictions between the applicant's testimony and medical records substantially increase dismissal risk[13]. Witness credibility determinations by the workers' compensation judge are given substantial deference and rarely overturned on appeal.

## Legal Framework and Statutory Authority

### Foundational Statutory Framework

California's workers' compensation system operates under Division 4 of the California Labor Code (Sections 3200-6000), with procedural rules established in Division 5 (Sections 5000-5808) and administrative appeal procedures codified in Division 5 Subchapter 2[14]. The WCAB's jurisdiction derives from [Labor Code

Section 5307][1], which grants the Appeals Board "all judicial powers vested by law in the division of workers' compensation." This includes authority to decide whether injuries arose out of and in the course of employment, to determine the extent of disability, and to award appropriate benefits.

The burden of proof in workers' compensation cases is governed by [Labor Code Section 3202.5][1], which establishes that the applicant (injured worker) must prove their case by "evidence that, when weighed with that opposed to it, has more convincing force and greater probability of truth." This is the preponderance of the evidence standard, which is lower than the "clear and convincing evidence" standard and substantially lower than the "beyond reasonable doubt" standard used in criminal proceedings[15]. This distinction is critical: the applicant need not prove their case with absolute certainty, only that it is more probable than not.

#### Regulatory Procedural Framework for Trials

The WCAB's procedural rules are codified in California Code of Regulations, Title 8, Sections 10400-10825. These regulations establish the mandatory settlement conference requirement under [8 CCR Section 10757][2], which provides that before any contested hearing can occur, parties must participate in a mandatory settlement conference where discovery closes. [Section 10502(d)(3)][16] specifies that discovery closes on the date of the mandatory settlement conference, with strict limitations on introducing evidence not previously disclosed in pretrial conference statements.

Trial procedures are governed by [8 CCR Section 10787][20], which requires that "parties shall submit for decision all matters properly in issue at a single trial and produce at the trial all necessary evidence, including witnesses, documents, medical reports, payroll statements and all other matters considered essential in the proof of a party's claim or defense." This regulation further provides that workers' compensation judges may order bifurcated trials upon showing of good cause, but the preference is for complete presentation of all evidence in a single hearing[20].

Evidence rules for workers' compensation trials are significantly more permissive than civil trial rules. [Labor Code Section 5709][1] establishes that "no informality in any proceeding or in the manner of taking testimony shall invalidate any order, decision, award or rule made and filed," and "no order, decision, award or rule shall be invalidated because of the admission into the record...of any evidence not admissible under the common law or statutory rules of evidence and procedure." This language has been interpreted to mean that hearsay evidence is admissible in workers' compensation proceedings, though with certain limitations discussed below[17].

#### Hearsay and Documentary Evidence Standards

[Labor Code Section 5708][1] addresses evidence admissibility, permitting relevant evidence regardless of whether it would be admissible in civil actions if it is "the sort of evidence on which responsible persons are accustomed to rely in the conduct of serious affairs." Hearsay evidence may be used to supplement or explain other evidence, but over timely objection shall not be sufficient by itself to support a finding unless it would be admissible in civil actions[21]. This creates a nuanced hearsay framework: hearsay can support findings if unopposed, but if a party objects, hearsay alone cannot constitute sufficient evidence.

Documentary evidence standards are addressed in [8 CCR Section 10670][7], which establishes that certified copies of governmental agency reports are admissible in lieu of originals, and that the WCAB may decline to receive documents not listed on the Pre-Trial Conference Statement or not served at the mandatory settlement conference unless good cause is shown. Physician reports must comply with [Labor Code Section 4628][1] or, alternatively, good cause must be shown for non-compliance. This regulatory framework reflects the tension between accessibility (permitting informal evidence) and procedural integrity (requiring pre-trial disclosure of key evidence).

#### Credibility and Evidence Evaluation Standards

A significant recent development clarifies credibility evaluation standards. In [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan), 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (2025)][17], the California Court of Appeal held that [Labor Code Section 5313][1]-which requires workers' compensation judges to state reasons for their decisions-does not require detailed explanations of credibility determinations beyond ultimate facts and the evidence relied upon[17]. WCJs need not analyze witness demeanor or provide granular credibility rationales, provided they adequately explain the basis for their ultimate factual findings[17]. However, the same decision held that

violations of [Labor Code Section 5502][1] discovery closure requirements are "not subject to harmless error analysis," meaning that admitting evidence not listed in pretrial conference statements can result in decision reversal even if the evidence would not have changed the outcome[17][24].

## Current Legal Landscape and Recent Developments

### Recent Board En Banc Decisions Affecting Trial Procedures

The WCAB has issued significant en banc decisions in 2025 that affect trial administration. In [Tyson Perez v. Chicago Dogs, Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., 2025-EB-02 (August 14, 2025)][8], the Appeals Board held that when a witness is unable to appear in person and a request for electronic testimony is made on the record at the beginning of the hearing with opportunity for any party to respond, this satisfies procedural requirements and constitutes good cause under due process principles. The decision further held that "the due process right to a fair hearing and a determination based on the merits is good cause to allow the electronic testimony of the witness," meaning that electronic witness testimony should be "readily permitted" when a witness cannot appear in person[8]. This represents significant liberalization of virtual testimony procedures, particularly important in the context of post-pandemic practice.

In [Abel Vasquez v. Inocensio Renteria; Zenith Insurance Co., 2025-EB-01 (May 19, 2025)][8], the Appeals Board established that only the WCAB has jurisdiction to determine whether a replacement Qualified Medical Evaluator (QME) panel is valid or appropriate. This decision has implications for medical evidence presentation at trial: if a party intends to rely on QME evidence, proper panel procedures must be followed, and any challenges to panel validity must be resolved before trial[8].

In [Jillian DiFusco v. Hands On Spa, 2025-EB-03 (October 13, 2025)][8], the Appeals Board held that WCAB Rules 10390, 10400, and 10401 require that parties, representatives, and insurance companies be fully identified in all filings, and that "only the Appeals Board is statutorily authorized to issue regulations for adjudication" of workers' compensation proceedings[8].

### Credibility Standards and Discovery Closure Enforcement

The most significant recent development for trial practitioners is [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan), 111 Cal. App. 5th 1136 (2025)][24], decided by the Third District Court of Appeal. This decision establishes firm boundaries on evidence admissibility at trial. The court held that [Labor Code Section 5502(d)(3)], which closes discovery at the mandatory settlement conference, serves two critical purposes: (1) eliminating the element of surprise in workers' compensation proceedings, and (2) guaranteeing productive dialogue for framing stipulations and issues[24].

Most significantly, the court stated: "Disregard for the statutory procedural mechanisms for resolving workers' compensation cases is inappropriate," and "such disregard is not subject to harmless error analysis"[24]. This language indicates that even if improperly admitted evidence would not have changed the trial outcome, its admission can justify reversal of the decision[24]. This has profound implications: trial judges must strictly apply pre-trial conference statement requirements, and parties must ensure all evidence-particularly medical reports-are properly listed and served before the mandatory settlement conference.

### COVID-Era Procedural Modifications and Electronic Hearings

While the COVID-19 emergency proclamations have largely expired, the WCAB has maintained electronic hearing procedures in its permanent rules. [8 CCR Section 10815][15] now addresses electronic hearings as a standard option, and en banc precedent confirms that witnesses may testify electronically when good cause is shown. This means trial practitioners should expect that some hearings may be conducted partially or entirely through videoconference, particularly in multi-party cases or when witnesses are geographically dispersed.

### Expedited Hearing Procedures

For cases where injury is accepted as compensable but disputes exist regarding medical treatment or temporary disability, [8 CCR Section 10782][25] provides for expedited hearing procedures. These hearings may be requested when the only issue is treatment or TD for an accepted injury, and the WCJ has discretion to designate whether a case is appropriate for expedited determination[25]. Expedited hearings are designed to move cases through the system quickly, but WCJs may re-designate cases as mandatory settlement conferences if issues are complex or multiple witnesses require extensive testimony[25].

## Statutory Presumption of Compensability (90-Day Rule)

A critical procedural advantage for applicants exists in [Labor Code Section 5402][9], which provides that if the employer fails to deny a claim within 90 days after the claim form is filed, the injury is presumed to be compensable. This presumption is rebuttable-the employer can overcome it by introducing evidence that the injury is non-compensable-but it shifts the burden strategically at trial[9]. If an injury has not been denied within 90 days, the applicant begins trial with a presumption of compensability, and the employer must affirmatively prove the injury did not arise out of and in the course of employment.

## San Francisco-Specific Context and Localized Procedures

### San Francisco WCAB Office Locations and Assignment

The Workers' Compensation Appeals Board serving the San Francisco Bay Area operates from multiple locations. Primary hearings in the nine-county Bay Area are conducted at the San Francisco WCAB, located at 100 Montgomery Street, Suite 800, San Francisco, CA 94104, and alternatively at 630 Sansome Street, 4th Floor, Room 475, San Francisco, CA 94111[3]. For injured workers in the East Bay, a satellite location operates in Concord at 1855 Gateway Blvd., Suite 850, Concord, CA 94520[3]. Case assignment is typically geographic, based on where the injury occurred.

### Procedural Requirements Specific to San Francisco WCAB

San Francisco WCAB follows the statewide procedural rules codified in Title 8 of the California Code of Regulations, but application varies based on individual judge practices. Consistent with state rules, [8 CCR Section 10757][2] requires a mandatory settlement conference before trial, and [8 CCR Section 10502(d)(3)][16] mandates discovery closure at the MSC. Pre-trial conference statements must be filed at or before the MSC, listing all evidence, witnesses, and stipulated facts[11].

Local practice in San Francisco tends to require detailed pre-trial conference statements with specific identification of medical reports by date and treating provider. Judges in the San Francisco office frequently enforce discovery closure rules strictly, consistent with recent appellate precedent[17][24]. Attorneys practicing before San Francisco WCJs should expect that any medical evidence not listed in the pretrial conference statement will face admissibility challenges, and WCJs are unlikely to grant continuances to obtain unlisted evidence[24].

### Settlement Conference Practice and Mandatory Attendance

[8 CCR Section 10752][14] requires that "each required party shall have a person available with settlement authority at all hearings." For represented injured employees, the statute requires personal attendance at mandatory settlement conferences[14]. In San Francisco WCAB practice, this means the injured worker must appear personally at the MSC, not merely by telephone or through an attorney. Insurance company representatives with settlement authority must also attend. This requirement is strictly enforced, and failure to attend with settlement authority may result in sanctions[14].

### Discovery Closure and Evidence Listing Requirements

Pre-trial conference statements in San Francisco must comply with [Labor Code Section 5502][1], which establishes that discovery closes on the MSC date. [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)][24] makes clear that San Francisco WCJs must strictly apply these closure rules. Any medical report, witness statement, or documentary evidence not listed in the pretrial conference statement is subject to exclusion. While [8 CCR Section 10670][7] permits WCJs to exercise discretion regarding unlisted documents where good cause is shown, recent appellate precedent indicates this discretion is narrow, and violations are not subject to harmless error analysis.

### San Francisco Asylum Office Context (Note on Disconnect)

The original research instructions reference San Francisco Asylum Office procedures; however, this is inapplicable to workers' compensation trials, which are administrative proceedings unrelated to immigration law. Workers' compensation trials are conducted before workers' compensation judges, not immigration judges, and involve entirely different statutory and regulatory frameworks.

### Strategic Analysis Framework for Trial Preparation

## Arguments Favoring the Applicant's Position at Trial

**Argument 1: Presumption of Compensability Under Labor Code Section 5402.** If the employer has not denied the claim within 90 days of the claim form filing, the injury is presumed compensable[12][9]. This is a powerful procedural advantage: the burden shifts to the employer to affirmatively prove the injury did not arise out of and in the course of employment. Applicants should establish this presumption early in trial testimony by confirming claim filing date and absence of timely denial. Strength assessment: Strong, if properly established by documentary evidence of claim form and correspondence.

**Argument 2: Credible Applicant Testimony Corroborated by Medical Evidence.** [Labor Code Section 5313][1] requires WCJs to consider applicant credibility, and recent precedent confirms that credible testimony supported by contemporaneous medical records carries substantial evidentiary weight[17][24]. Lay testimony alone can establish industrial causation for obvious injuries (e.g., a worker testifying they fell and injured their back at work requires no medical expert to establish causation)[15]. If the applicant testifies clearly and consistently regarding how the injury occurred, and treating physician reports corroborate the reported mechanism of injury, this combination creates a strong evidentiary foundation. Strength assessment: Strong, assuming testimony is consistent with medical records and free of major contradictions.

**Argument 3: Post-Injury Workplace Modifications or Accepted Treatment.** If the employer accepted related benefits (temporary disability, medical treatment) for the claimed injury, this constitutes an implied admission that the injury is work-related[12]. Courts and WCJs interpret employer benefit payments as acknowledgments of compensability. Additionally, if the employer directed the applicant to see a specific medical provider, documentation of that directive supports applicability of the injury to employment. Strength assessment: Moderate to Strong, depending on the extent and timing of benefit acceptance.

**Argument 4: Consistency in Contemporaneous Records.** Early medical reports, emergency room records, initial workers' compensation claim forms, and supervisor reports documenting the incident are highly credible evidence because they were created at or near the time of injury, before any litigation posture developed[2][4]. If the applicant's trial testimony aligns with what was stated in these contemporaneous documents, this strengthens credibility significantly. Inconsistencies with later-created reports are less damaging if the contemporaneous account was consistent. Strength assessment: Strong to Moderate, depending on how favorably contemporaneous records describe the injury circumstances.

## Arguments Opposing the Applicant's Position

**Counter-Argument 1: Applicant Credibility Impeachment Through Medical Record Contradictions.** The employer's strongest defensive position involves identifying inconsistencies between applicant testimony and medical records. In [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)][17], the applicant's credibility was substantially damaged because he testified at deposition that he had never experienced right shoulder pain before the claimed injury, but medical records from 2013-2015 documented prior shoulder treatment and impingement diagnosis[17]. If the employer can establish through medical records that the applicant has prior injuries, pre-existing conditions, or treatment gaps inconsistent with the claimed ongoing disability, the WCJ is likely to find the applicant's testimony unreliable[17][24]. This does not necessarily defeat the claim-applicants can have pre-existing conditions and subsequent work-related aggravations-but it reduces credibility. Strength assessment: Moderate to Strong, depending on magnitude of contradictions discovered.

**Counter-Argument 2: Non-Occupational Causation or Intervening Factors.** The employer may introduce evidence of non-occupational risk factors: the applicant's age, obesity, heavy lifting outside work, prior injuries, or medical conditions that could explain the claimed disability without work causation[16]. For example, if an applicant claims a back injury from moving boxes at work but medical imaging shows severe degenerative disc disease consistent with natural aging rather than acute trauma, the employer can argue the injury resulted from non-work factors[5]. This argument does not require the employer to disprove work involvement entirely; rather, it argues the work was not the cause of the claimed condition. Strength assessment: Moderate, particularly if medical evidence strongly suggests alternative causation.

**Counter-Argument 3: Absence of Medical Expert Opinion on Causation.** While lay testimony can establish industrial causation for obvious injuries, complex medical conditions require expert medical opinion[15]. If the applicant's injury is a non-obvious medical condition (e.g., neuropathy, specific organ dysfunction, psychological injury) and the only evidence is applicant testimony without supporting medical expert opinion, the employer can argue the causation is insufficiently proven[15]. Medical causation testimony from a treating

provider or Qualified Medical Evaluator significantly strengthens applicant claims for complex conditions. Strength assessment: Strong, if medical complexity is evident but expert testimony is lacking.

Counter-Argument 4: Procedural Defects in Claim Development or Evidence Presentation. Recent WCAB precedent strictly enforces procedural requirements[17][24]. If an applicant's attorney fails to list medical evidence in the pretrial conference statement, the employer can move to exclude that evidence at trial. Similarly, if medical reports fail to comply with [Labor Code Section 4628][1] verification requirements, they may be excluded or given reduced weight[5]. Procedural defects are particularly damaging because, under current precedent, they are not subject to harmless error analysis—meaning the WCJ must exclude improperly presented evidence regardless of its likely probative value[17][24]. Strength assessment: Moderate to Strong, if procedural violations are significant.

#### Risk Assessment Matrix

Best-Case Scenario (Moderate to High Likelihood): The applicant establishes that the employer failed to deny the claim within 90 days (activating the presumption of compensability), provides testimony consistent with all treating physician reports and contemporaneous workplace documentation, presents lay witness testimony from coworkers corroborating the mechanism of injury, and medical evidence clearly links the work activity to the injury. In this scenario, the WCJ is likely to award benefits for the accepted injury type with temporary disability and potentially permanent disability depending on medical evidence. Likelihood descriptor: Moderate to High, with actual numeric probability dependent on specifics of medical evidence and clarity of causation.

Worst-Case Scenario (Low to Moderate Likelihood): The applicant testifies regarding injury causation in a manner inconsistent with medical records; medical imaging or clinical findings suggest pre-existing, non-occupational conditions rather than work-related injury; the employer introduces substantial medical expert testimony on non-occupational causation; and critical medical evidence is excluded from trial due to procedural defects in pre-trial filing. In this scenario, the WCJ is likely to deny the claim or award minimal benefits. Likelihood descriptor: Low to Moderate, depending on severity of evidentiary problems and procedural violations.

Timing Risks: Discovery closure at the mandatory settlement conference is absolute. Medical evidence that emerges after the MSC (e.g., results of testing ordered post-MSD) cannot be admitted at trial without exceptional circumstances. QME evaluation delays are common and can extend the entire timeline significantly. Applicants should expect a total timeline of four to six months from Declaration of Readiness filing to final decision, with potential extensions if appeals are pursued.

Collateral Consequences Risks: If the injured worker is seeking permanent disability benefits, the decision will be based on a workers' compensation judge's findings regarding the degree of disability, which may affect ongoing medical benefits, vocational rehabilitation entitlements, and lifetime benefit eligibility. A low permanent disability rating at trial may be difficult to overcome on appeal and could affect future medical treatment authorization.

#### Practical Implementation: Trial Preparation Roadmap

##### Pre-Trial Mandatory Settlement Conference Phase

Timeline: Upon filing a Declaration of Readiness to Proceed, the WCAB must schedule a mandatory settlement conference within 30 days[8][10]. The Declaration itself is a critical document that signals readiness for hearing and must specify the type of hearing requested (mandatory settlement conference, rating mandatory settlement conference, priority conference, or lien conference)[10].

Pre-Trial Conference Statement Requirements: [Labor Code Section 5502][1] requires that the pre-trial conference statement list all evidence, witnesses who will testify, and disputed issues. This statement must be filed at or before the mandatory settlement conference[1]. The statement should include: (a) agreed facts (issues both parties acknowledge); (b) disputed issues (the central contested matters); (c) a complete listing of medical reports by date, treating provider, and page count; (d) witness identification with roles (eyewitness, character witness, medical expert, employer representative); (e) exhibit list with brief descriptions; and (f) documentary evidence such as employment records, incident reports, and medical bills[11].

Critical Compliance Issue: Under [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)][24], evidence not listed in the pre-trial conference statement is subject to exclusion at trial, and this exclusion is not subject to harmless error analysis. Practitioners must ensure comprehensive listing of all anticipated evidence before the MSC[24]. A conservative approach is to list all potentially relevant documents, even if some may not be used at trial, rather than risk exclusion of critical evidence due to incomplete pre-trial disclosure.

Settlement Negotiation Strategy at MSC: The mandatory settlement conference is not merely a procedural formality but a critical negotiation opportunity. Insurance companies often have different settlement authority at the MSC than they do pre-litigation. Applicants represented by counsel should work with their attorney to prepare a settlement position with realistic valuation based on injury severity, medical prognosis, age, and prior earnings. Settlement discussions should address: (a) medical benefit duration (temporary or permanent); (b) disability benefit amount and duration; (c) vocational rehabilitation benefits if applicable; and (d) liability for medical bills and mileage reimbursement[11].

#### Trial Evidence Preparation

Medical Evidence Organization: Compile all medical reports in chronological order, clearly labeling each by provider, date, and relevance. Pre-trial conference statement must identify reports by these details. Medical evidence should include: treating physician progress notes, specialist evaluations, diagnostic imaging reports, laboratory findings, and QME reports if obtained. Ensure all medical reports comply with [Labor Code Section 4628][1] verification requirements (physician declaration under penalty of perjury)[4][5].

Documentary Evidence File: Organize employment records including: job description, work schedule, wage statements, medical expense invoices, temporary disability authorization forms, and any employer safety procedures or incident reports. [8 CCR Section 10670][7] permits only copies (not originals) to be filed with the WCAB, so prepare high-quality photocopies or electronic scans. Ensure business records are properly authenticated under [Labor Code Section 5708][1], which permits certified copies of governmental agency records without requiring live witness testimony regarding record-keeping procedures[9].

Witness Coordination: Identify and prepare all witnesses who will testify. Witnesses should include: (a) the applicant (injured worker), whose testimony is nearly always required; (b) eyewitnesses to the injury incident (coworkers, supervisors, customers); (c) character or habit witnesses who can testify regarding the applicant's work performance and safety practices before injury; and (d) after-the-fact witnesses who can describe the applicant's immediate condition post-injury (paramedics, managers, nearby employees)[1]. Prepare each witness with anticipated questions, likely cross-examination topics, and proper courtroom demeanor guidance. Applicants should understand that testimony inconsistency with medical records is the employer's primary attack on credibility[24].

Medical Expert Preparation: If medical causation is disputed, prepare the applicant's medical expert witness (treating provider or QME if available). The expert should review all medical records, be prepared to explain the mechanism of injury clearly, and articulate the connection between the work activity and the claimed condition. [8 CCR Section 10685][5][15] establishes that vocational expert evidence should be presented as written reports; direct examination at trial of vocational experts requires showing of good cause. This means medical expert testimony is more heavily relied upon than other expert testimony for trial purposes.

#### Procedural Requirements Before Trial

Judge Assignment: Once the Declaration of Readiness is filed, a workers' compensation judge is assigned to the case. That WCJ will conduct the mandatory settlement conference and, if settlement fails, will preside over the trial. Understanding the assigned judge's prior rulings and practices is valuable for strategy adjustment.

Motion Practice: If either party believes certain evidence should be excluded or certain issues bifurcated, motions must be filed before the mandatory settlement conference. [8 CCR Section 10510][1] establishes the procedure for filing motions, requiring a moving party to provide reasonable notice and an opportunity to respond. Motions for sanctions, protective orders, or discovery relief must be brought well before the MSC.

Continuance Requests: If additional time is needed for evidence development, medical evaluation, or witness coordination, the moving party must request a continuance before the MSC. Continuances are discretionary

with the WCJ, and recent precedent suggests liberal continuance practice to permit adequate case preparation. However, continuances extend the overall timeline significantly[26].

### Materials Required for Trial

According to [8 CCR Section 10787][20], parties must bring to trial: (a) all witnesses (arranged to testify live, via deposition transcript, or electronically); (b) all exhibits in original and copy form, available for WCJ review; (c) all medical reports, properly verified; (d) payroll statements documenting wage loss; and (e) any other evidence essential to proof. If exhibits have not been previously filed with the WCAB, they must be available at trial for the judge to review before receipt into evidence[20].

**Exhibit Preparation:** Pre-prepare exhibit index for trial, with original and copy sets, clearly labeled with numbers or letters. Each exhibit should have a corresponding witness or document authentication statement. Exhibits should be organized chronologically or by category (medical, employment, incident-related) for easy trial reference[20].

### Trial Witnesses: Identification, Preparation, and Testimony Strategies

#### Types of Admissible Witnesses Under California Workers' Compensation Law

**Eyewitnesses to the Injury.** These are individuals who directly observed the accident or injury event. For example, a coworker who saw the applicant trip over unsecured wiring, a supervisor present when machinery malfunctioned, or a customer in a retail store who witnessed the fall[1]. Eyewitness testimony is highly valuable because it provides direct observation of the mechanism of injury and can describe the exact sequence of events. Eyewitness credibility is evaluated based on opportunity to observe, clarity of perception, memory, communication ability, and potential bias[1]. Eyewitnesses need not be subjected to professional qualification requirements; lay observers can testify to what they directly witnessed[1].

**Character and Habit Witnesses.** Coworkers and supervisors can testify regarding the applicant's work habits, safety practices, diligence, and general workplace behavior before the injury[1]. This testimony is relevant to rebutting any employer claim that the applicant was negligent or careless at work. For example, a supervisor can testify that the applicant consistently followed safety protocols, attended safety training, and was a careful worker. Habit evidence—testimony regarding the applicant's routine practices and customary procedures—can establish that the injury was not caused by departure from normal work practice[1]. These witnesses do not require special expertise; they provide contextual character evidence.

**After-the-Fact Witnesses.** People who did not observe the injury itself but observed the applicant's immediate condition afterward or inspected the injury scene shortly after the incident[1]. This category includes paramedics who responded to emergency calls (who can testify regarding the applicant's pain level and condition), managers who inspected the area where the injury occurred (who can describe hazardous conditions), and security personnel who reviewed incident scene photographs. Paramedics and emergency responders are particularly valuable because they can testify regarding the applicant's apparent distress, pain level, and the applicant's own statements regarding how the injury occurred, though their observations are necessarily limited to the immediate post-injury period[1].

**Medical Witnesses: Treating Providers.** The applicant's treating physician or other healthcare providers who examined and treated the injured worker are powerful trial witnesses. Treating providers can testify regarding: (a) the applicant's reported history of the injury; (b) clinical examination findings; (c) diagnosis; (d) causation opinions (whether the injury arose from the work activity); and (e) prognosis and permanency[5]. Treating provider testimony is typically given substantial weight because of their direct knowledge of the applicant's condition and their treating relationship. However, treating providers must comply with [Labor Code Section 4628][1] verification requirements; their reports must contain specific declarations under penalty of perjury[5]. If a treating provider is unavailable for live testimony, their written report may be admitted, but the judge may find it less persuasive than live testimony subject to cross-examination[5].

**Qualified Medical Evaluators (QMEs).** If neither party's treating physician is willing to testify, or if a neutral medical opinion is needed, a Qualified Medical Evaluator may testify. QMEs are neutral medical experts selected from panels established by the WCAB. QME testimony is valued for its neutrality and formal evaluation procedures. QME reports must comply with [8 CCR Section 10685][5] and include detailed descriptions of evaluation methods, examination findings, and causation rationales. While direct examination

of QMEs requires showing of good cause under [8 CCR Section 10685][5], QME written reports are typically admitted into evidence[5].

**Vocational Rehabilitation Experts.** If permanent disability is claimed and vocational rehabilitation is relevant, vocational experts may testify regarding the applicant's work capacity, transferable skills, and retraining needs. [8 CCR Section 10685][5] establishes that the WCAB favors vocational expert evidence in written report form, and direct examination requires showing of good cause. Vocational experts do not require medical credentials but should have professional credentials in vocational rehabilitation, labor market analysis, or occupational counseling[5].

**Industrial Hygienists and Safety Experts.** For occupational disease cases or complex industrial injury cases, industrial hygienists or safety experts may testify regarding workplace hazards, exposure levels, or safety protocols. These experts require professional credentials in occupational health and safety fields. Their testimony is relevant to establishing whether the work environment caused or contributed to the claimed condition[5].

#### Witness Credibility Standards and Evaluative Criteria

[Labor Code Section 5313][1] requires workers' compensation judges to state the reasons and grounds for their decisions, including findings regarding witness credibility. However, recent precedent clarifies that detailed credibility analysis is not required; ultimate findings regarding essential facts are sufficient[24]. Judges evaluate credibility based on: (a) opportunity to observe or perceive; (b) clarity and particularity of memory; (c) consistency with other evidence; (d) apparent bias or interest in outcome; (e) reasonableness of testimony in light of human experience; and (f) demeanor and communication ability[24].

Lay testimony credibility is heavily influenced by consistency with documentary evidence. In [DPR Construction v. WCAB (McClanahan)][24], the court emphasized that the applicant's testimony was deemed unreliable because it conflicted with contemporaneous medical records. An applicant who testifies that an injury occurred at work but medical records indicate no treatment-seeking for months afterward will have credibility problems. Conversely, testimony that matches injury description in contemporaneous emergency room records or initial treating provider notes is highly credible[24].

Witness demeanor and communication style affect credibility. A witness who testifies clearly, admits uncertainty when appropriate, maintains consistent eye contact, and avoids argumentativeness is perceived as more credible than a defensive or evasive witness[4]. Applicants should be prepared to admit facts they do not recall and to acknowledge medical conditions beyond their direct knowledge, deferring to medical experts on technical issues.

Bias concerns are significant. An applicant's own testimony regarding injury severity is inevitably viewed with some skepticism because the applicant has financial incentive to exaggerate. This is why corroborating testimony and documentary evidence are critical; they provide objective support for applicant claims[1][4]. Conversely, employer representatives who testify in denying claims are also viewed with inherent skepticism due to employer financial interest in minimizing liability[4].

#### Witness Preparation Strategy

**Applicant Testimony Preparation:** The applicant should be thoroughly prepared for direct examination and cross-examination. Direct examination by the applicant's attorney should focus on: (a) clear description of job duties and work environment; (b) detailed narrative of how the injury occurred, including mechanism (fall, overexertion, repetitive motion), timing, and immediate symptoms; (c) testimony regarding injury severity and ongoing symptoms; and (d) impact on work performance and activities of daily living[4]. The applicant should speak in plain language, avoiding medical jargon and legal terms.

Cross-examination by employer's counsel will focus on: (a) identifying any pre-existing similar injuries or medical conditions; (b) establishing gaps between injury and medical treatment-seeking; (c) identifying any non-occupational activities that could explain the condition; (d) exploring inconsistencies with medical records; and (e) challenging permanency claims through testimony regarding current functional abilities[4][17]. Applicants should be prepared for aggressive questioning but instructed to answer only the specific question asked, not to provide volunteered explanations, and to admit when they do not know or recall information rather than speculate[4].

Coworker Witness Preparation: Eyewitnesses to the injury should be asked to recall: (a) date and time of the incident; (b) what they observed directly; (c) any prior safety violations or hazardous conditions leading to the incident; (d) the applicant's immediate reaction and apparent pain; and (e) any statements made by the applicant immediately after the injury[1]. Witnesses should be advised to stick to their personal observations and not speculate regarding medical causation or permanency, which are expert matters.

Medical Witness Preparation: Treating providers and medical experts should review: (a) the medical records in detail, including any reports they may have written years prior that they might not recall; (b) the mechanism of injury and how it relates to the diagnosis; (c) alternative causation theories the defense might raise; and (d) any tests or procedures they are recommending regarding permanency[5]. Physicians should be prepared to explain their findings in lay terms, avoiding unnecessary technical jargon that the judge cannot understand.

## Deposition and Electronic Testimony Procedures

Witness testimony at trial can be presented in live form (witness appears in person), through deposition transcript (oral testimony given before trial and transcribed, read into the record at trial), or through written statements (under the relaxed hearsay rules of Labor Code Section 5708)[2][4]. [8 CCR Section 10800][12] provides that testimony taken at hearings is not transcribed unless requested in writing with payment of the fee prescribed by the Administrative Director. If a witness is unavailable for live trial testimony, a deposition can be taken, and the deposition transcript can be read into evidence at trial[2][4].

Recent en banc precedent has liberalized electronic testimony procedures. [Tyson Perez v. Chicago Dogs, Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., 2025-EB-02][8] established that when a witness cannot appear in person and a request for electronic testimony is made on the record at the beginning of the hearing, electronic testimony satisfies procedural requirements and constitutes good cause[8]. This means trial judges should grant electronic testimony requests readily, particularly when witness unavailability is genuine (e.g., witness has moved away, witness is seriously ill or hospitalized)[8].

## Trial Brief Preparation and Strategic Framing

### Statutory and Regulatory Framework for Trial Briefs

Trial briefs are not statutorily required in California workers' compensation proceedings, unlike federal civil litigation. However, trial briefs serve significant strategic purposes and are highly recommended. [8 CCR Section 10787][20] requires that "parties shall submit for decision all matters properly in issue at a single trial and produce at the trial all necessary evidence." While this language does not explicitly require trial briefs, judges appreciate organized, concise written statements of the case positions.

A trial brief is distinct from a pre-trial conference statement. The pre-trial conference statement lists evidence and witnesses[11][10]. A trial brief presents the applicant's legal arguments, factual narrative, and application of law to facts[2]. Trial briefs should not exceed 15 pages absent exceptional circumstances[2], and should be organized with clear headings, statement of facts, statement of law, and argument sections[18].

### Trial Brief Contents and Strategic Organization

Statement of Facts Section: The trial brief should present a coherent narrative of how the injury occurred, emphasizing facts that support work causation. This narrative should track the evidence that will be presented at trial—medical reports, witness testimony, employment records—and weave these sources into a unified story[2]. For example:

> "On July 15, 2023, Applicant was employed as a warehouse worker at Company X, located in Oakland. His job duties included moving heavy boxes (up to 50 pounds) from loading dock to storage shelves, a task he performed daily in compliance with company safety procedures. On July 15, while moving a box of product, Applicant felt a sharp pain in his lower back. He immediately reported the injury to his supervisor, Manager Jones, and was referred to emergency care. Emergency room physician Dr. Smith documented that Applicant reported acute lower back pain with radiation to the left leg, consistent with a lumbar strain injury. Applicant did not have any reported back pain or treatment before this incident."

This narrative structure connects the work activity (moving boxes), the injury mechanism (feeling sharp pain), and corroborating evidence (supervisor report, emergency room documentation). Every fact should be traceable to trial evidence.

Statement of Law Section: This section should cite governing Labor Code sections and relevant case law. For workers' compensation trials, the applicable law typically includes: [Labor Code Section 3202.5][1] (definition of injury requiring preponderance of evidence standard); [Labor Code Section 5402][1] (presumption of compensability if not denied within 90 days); and any relevant court of appeal precedent regarding causation, credibility, or benefit entitlement. The law section should be concise-one to two pages-and focused on the specific legal standards applicable to the case.

Argument Section: This section applies facts to law, explaining how the evidence proves each element of the claim. For example, the argument might be organized as follows:

Applicant Meets the Burden of Proving Industrial Injury. The applicant has presented testimony regarding the work activity that caused the injury, treating physician reports confirming the diagnosis, and objective medical findings (imaging results, clinical examination) supporting the injury diagnosis. This evidence, taken together, establishes by preponderance that the claimed injury arose out of and occurred in the course of employment.

The Presumption of Compensability Applies. The employer did not deny the claim within 90 days of the claim form filing, therefore, [Labor Code Section 5402][1] presumes the injury compensable. The employer has not rebutted this presumption with credible evidence.

Applicant is Entitled to Appropriate Benefits. Based on the medical evidence of disability, applicant is entitled to [specify benefits: temporary disability, permanent disability, vocational rehabilitation, medical treatment].

Each argument subsection should reference specific evidence-"Dr. Smith's report of April 10, 2024 states..."-rather than making abstract legal statements[2].

Exhibits and Evidence References: Trial briefs should reference exhibits with specific exhibit numbers: "Exhibit 5, Applicant's Medical Report, Dr. Smith, April 10, 2024, page 2." This helps the judge quickly locate evidence referenced in the brief and facilitates judicial decision-making[2].

### Strategic Framing in Trial Briefs

The trial brief is an opportunity to frame the case narrative favorably. Injured workers' cases benefit from narrative structure that emphasizes: (1) clear work causation through simple, direct mechanism; (2) immediate medical treatment and contemporaneous documentation; (3) credible applicant testimony; and (4) medical expert alignment. Employers' trial briefs typically emphasize: (1) pre-existing conditions or non-occupational causes; (2) gaps between injury and treatment-seeking; (3) lack of medical expert support for causation; and (4) applicant testimony credibility problems.

Strategic framing means organizing the facts and law to tell the most persuasive story. For applicants, a timeline showing injury -> immediate medical treatment -> consistent medical diagnosis is powerful[24]. For employers, highlighting applicant testimony inconsistencies with medical records is effective[24].

### Evidentiary Requirements and Evidence Presentation at Trial

#### Medical Evidence Standards and Compliance Requirements

[Labor Code Section 4628][1] establishes specific requirements for physician reports in workers' compensation cases. Reports must contain: (a) the provider's name and credentials; (b) a clear statement that the report is prepared for workers' compensation purposes; (c) a thorough history of the applicant's chief complaint and mechanism of injury; (d) relevant past medical history; (e) clinical examination findings; (f) diagnostic testing results; (g) diagnosis with clear causal relationship to the work injury; (h) treatment recommendations; and (i) declaration under penalty of perjury[5]. Physician reports that fail to comply with Section 4628 may be excluded from evidence or given reduced weight, unless good cause is shown for non-compliance[5][7].

The declaration requirement is particularly important: physician reports must include the statement, "I declare under penalty of perjury that I have examined this applicant and that the foregoing report is true and correct to the best of my knowledge." [5] Reports lacking this declaration can be excluded[7]. Applicants' attorneys should carefully review all medical reports before trial to ensure compliance with verification requirements.

Qualified Medical Evaluator (QME) Reports: If the case involves a QME panel and evaluation, the QME report is particularly critical. [Labor Code Section 5307][1] establishes the QME process, and [8 CCR Section

10685][5] specifies report requirements. QME reports must comply with all Section 4628 requirements plus additional specifications: identification of the QME's qualifications, declaration that no other person participated in non-clerical preparation of the report (or, if so, identification of those persons and their qualifications), listing of all information reviewed, and specific findings and opinions regarding causation[5]. QME reports serve as neutral medical evidence and, if properly prepared, carry significant evidentiary weight[5].

#### Documentary Evidence and Business Records

[Labor Code Section 5708][1] and [8 CCR Section 10670][7] govern admission of business records. Certified copies of governmental agency records are admissible in lieu of originals, and no person need be produced to authenticate such records[7]. For example, Social Security Administration records or tax records do not require live witness authentication; certified copies are sufficient[7].

Employment records such as job descriptions, wage statements, and timekeeping records are admissible without requiring live testimony from records custodians, provided they are properly authenticated[7][9]. Applicants should prepare certified copies of all employment records before trial: wage statements for six months before and after injury, job descriptions, any accident reports or incident reports, and medical bills[9].

Evidentiary Rules Less Stringent Than Civil Litigation: [Labor Code Section 5709][1] establishes that "no informality in any proceeding or in the manner of taking testimony shall invalidate any order, decision, award or rule made and filed." This permits workers' compensation judges to admit evidence that would be excluded in civil litigation, provided it is the type of evidence upon which responsible persons rely in serious affairs[1][4][9]. This means hearsay evidence, informal statements, and written documents not prepared with litigation in mind are admissible if they are reliable[1].

However, [Labor Code Section 5708][1] provides that over timely objection, hearsay evidence cannot be the sole basis for a finding unless it would be admissible in civil actions. This creates a distinction: hearsay is admissible to supplement or explain other evidence, but if objected to, it cannot stand alone[16][21]. Applicants should anticipate that employer counsel will object to hearsay statements at trial and should ensure corroborating evidence exists beyond hearsay.

#### Causation Evidence and Expert Requirements

For obvious injuries (applicant fell at work and fractured arm, or machinery struck applicant causing injury), lay testimony alone can establish causation[15][9]. An applicant can testify that the work activity caused the injury without medical expert testimony for straightforward, traumatic injuries[15]. However, for latent or non-obvious injuries (occupational disease, cumulative trauma, psychological injuries), medical expert testimony is typically required to establish causation[15][5].

The expert must explain the mechanism by which the work exposure caused the medical condition. For example, in a repetitive strain case, the medical expert must explain how repetitive work activities cause carpal tunnel syndrome; in an occupational disease case, the expert must establish how workplace exposure caused the claimed condition[5]. Expert testimony must address "reasonable medical probability" (which courts have interpreted as meaning more likely than not)[1].

#### Burden of Proof and Preponderance of Evidence Standard

Applicants bear the burden of proving every element of their claim by preponderance of the evidence under [Labor Code Section 3202.5][1], which defines preponderance as "evidence that, when weighed with that opposed to it, has more convincing force and greater probability of truth"[15][9]. Practically, this means applicants must present evidence that more than 50 percent likely supports the claimed injury causation and benefits[9][15].

However, this burden can be met through circumstantial evidence, and the burden shifts somewhat if the employer has not timely denied the claim[12]. [Labor Code Section 5402][9] establishes that if no denial is issued within 90 days, the injury is presumed compensable, and the employer must then rebut that presumption through affirmative evidence[9].

#### Northern California Implementation Details and Strategic Considerations

## San Francisco Immigration Court Applicability (Corrective Note)

A critical clarification is necessary: San Francisco Immigration Court is inapplicable to workers' compensation trials. Immigration Court addresses asylum, withholding of removal, cancellation of removal, and other immigration-related relief under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Workers' compensation trials are administrative proceedings conducted by the Workers' Compensation Appeals Board under the California Labor Code. These are entirely separate legal systems with different judges, different substantive law, different procedures, and different constitutional frameworks. References to immigration court procedures, immigration judges, asylum office procedures, or immigration-related evidence are irrelevant to workers' compensation trial preparation.

## Northern California WCAB Locations and Accessibility

Injured workers in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma) have their cases handled by the San Francisco WCAB. Primary locations are San Francisco (100 Montgomery Street, Suite 800), Oakland satellite (630 Sansome Street, 4th Floor), and Concord (1855 Gateway Blvd., Suite 850)[3]. Applicants should confirm their assigned judge and hearing location after a Declaration of Readiness is filed.

Travel accessibility to hearings can be a significant factor in San Francisco Bay Area cases. Injured workers in East Bay communities (Oakland, Hayward, Antioch, Stockton) may have hearings scheduled in Concord, reducing travel burden compared to San Francisco locations. Requests for venue change or hearing location accommodation can be made but must be supported by good cause[1].

## California State Law Interactions Affecting Benefits

While workers' compensation is governed by California Labor Code, several California criminal law provisions affect workers' compensation claims. [Penal Code Section 1473.7][1] permits vacation of convictions where the conviction was obtained without advisement of immigration consequences (relevant for immigrants with criminal records affecting SSN/work eligibility). [Penal Code Section 1203.43][1] permits resentencing of certain drug-related offenses in ways that may reduce immigration consequences. These state criminal law modifications can affect workers' compensation eligibility and wage calculations for non-citizen workers.

Additionally, [Labor Code Section 5307][1] does not contain citizenship requirements for workers' compensation benefits; non-citizens (including undocumented workers) are entitled to workers' compensation benefits if they meet employment and injury requirements[1]. This is an important distinction from other benefit programs and should be emphasized in cases involving immigrant workers.

## Interactions with California Workers' Compensation Insurance

California requires employers to maintain workers' compensation insurance under [Labor Code Section 3700][1]. The insurance carrier (not the employer directly) defends against workers' compensation claims and makes benefit determinations. Understanding the insurance carrier's claims adjuster and defense counsel is important for settlement negotiations and trial strategy.

Some self-insured employers maintain their own risk management departments and self-fund workers' compensation claims. The discovery and litigation dynamics differ slightly in self-insured cases because the employer's internal claims file is a party record rather than an insurance company record.

## Preservation and Appeal Strategy for Unsuccessful Trial Outcomes

### Preservation of Record for Appeal

Even if the applicant loses at trial, certain arguments and evidence should be preserved for appeal to the WCAB. [Labor Code Section 5900][1] permits petition for reconsideration of any final order or award within 20 days of decision[26]. If the WCJ rules against the applicant but the decision contains legal errors (incorrect application of law to facts), these errors can be preserved by objecting to the decision and requesting reconsideration[26].

Specific preservation strategies: (1) if medical evidence is excluded at trial due to procedural defects, object on the record and note the exclusion in the minutes of hearing; (2) if the WCJ misapplies law regarding

causation or burden of proof, reference the legal error in testimony and pre-trial submissions; (3) if the WCJ makes credibility determinations that are unsupported by evidence, highlight contradictions in the minutes of hearing; and (4) if procedural rules are violated (discovery closure violated, witness exclusion improper), object and ensure the record reflects the violation[26].

#### Petition for Reconsideration and WCAB Appeal

A Petition for Reconsideration must be filed within 20 days of the WCJ's decision[26]. The petition should specify: (a) whether the applicant disputes the WCJ's findings of fact; (b) whether the applicant disputes the WCJ's application of law; (c) any new evidence discovered after trial that was unavailable at the time of trial; and (d) specific reasons why the decision should be reconsidered[26]. The WCAB has 60 days from receipt of the petition to grant or deny reconsideration[26].

If reconsideration is denied by the WCAB, a writ of review may be filed with the California Court of Appeal within 45 days[26]. The appellate court reviews whether the WCAB made a reasonable decision based on facts in the record; appellate courts rarely overturn WCAB decisions on purely factual matters, but they do review legal application and procedural compliance[26].

#### Certification to WCAB for Legal Questions

Instead of appealing factual findings, applicants can request "certification" of legal questions to the WCAB if the case involves significant legal issues not previously resolved. Certification is a strategic alternative to direct appeal when the case raises novel legal questions but the facts are straightforward[1]. This is less commonly used but can be valuable in cases involving new legal theories or statutory interpretation questions.

#### Writ of Review and Federal Habeas Corpus as Last Resort

If the Court of Appeal denies relief, a petition for review can be filed with the California Supreme Court, though the Court rarely accepts workers' compensation cases[26]. For federal constitutional issues, habeas corpus petition can theoretically be filed in federal district court, but this is extremely rare and requires showing that state remedies are exhausted and federal constitutional rights are implicated[1].

#### Practical Implementation Summary and Key Timelines

| Procedural Stage | Deadline | Key Requirements |

---|---|---

| Application for Adjudication Filing | 1 year from injury, last treatment, or last benefit receipt | Initiates WCAB case; employer may answer within 10 days |

| Declaration of Readiness Filing | Discretionary; filed when party ready for hearing | Signals readiness for MSC; requests hearing type |

| Mandatory Settlement Conference | Within 30 days of Declaration filing | Discovery closes; pre-trial conference statement must be filed; settlement authority required |

| Trial (if settlement fails) | Within 75 days of Declaration filing | All evidence and witnesses presented; judge issues decision within 30 days |

| Petition for Reconsideration | Within 20 days of decision receipt | Must specify grounds for reconsideration |

| WCAB Decision on Reconsideration | Within 60 days of petition filing | Panel reviews WCJ decision and either grants or denies reconsideration |

| Writ of Review (if reconsideration denied) | Within 45 days of WCAB decision | Files with Court of Appeal; appellate review of legal and procedural issues |

This timeline illustrates that the entire process from Declaration of Readiness to final WCAB decision typically spans four to six months, potentially extending to one year or more if appeals are pursued.

#### Conclusion

California workers' compensation trials are streamlined administrative proceedings designed to provide expedited resolution of work injury disputes while maintaining fundamental fairness and due process. Trial success depends on systematic evidence preparation, credible witness testimony, compliance with strict procedural requirements, and clear legal framing through trial briefs and argument. Recent appellate precedent emphasizes that procedural compliance is non-negotiable and violations are not excused by harmless error analysis, making pre-trial preparation and discovery compliance critical.

Injured workers preparing for trial should work closely with experienced workers' compensation counsel to: (1) ensure all medical evidence complies with statutory verification requirements; (2) prepare comprehensive pre-trial conference statements listing all anticipated evidence; (3) coordinate witness testimony and ensure consistency with documentary evidence; (4) understand burden of proof standards and presumptions; and (5) develop persuasive trial briefs framing the case narrative favorably.

Employers and insurance carriers defending claims should focus on: (1) identifying credibility weaknesses in applicant testimony through detailed medical record review; (2) presenting medical expert testimony on non-occupational causation; (3) ensuring procedural compliance to prevent reversal on appeal; and (4) pursuing early settlement when evidentiary support for defense is weak.

The workers' compensation system's emphasis on efficiency and accessibility makes it significantly more favorable to injured workers than traditional civil litigation, but only for those who understand and comply with its unique procedural requirements and evidentiary standards. Trial success is achievable through thorough preparation, strategic evidence presentation, and clear legal argumentation.

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- [2] California Code of Regulations, Title 8, Sections 10400-10825 (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/t8/articles.html>)
- [3] DWC Injured Worker Guides - How to File an Application for Adjudication (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dwc/iwguides.html>)
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[26] How Long Can the Workers' Compensation Appeals Process Take? - Smith Comp Law (<https://smithcomplaw.com/how-long-can-the-workers-compensation-appeals-process-take/>)

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Report Completion Note: This comprehensive research report addresses California Workers' Compensation DWC Trials, Trial Briefs, and Trial Witnesses through analysis of applicable statutes, regulations, recent precedent, and practical implementation guidance. The report contains over 10,000 words of substantive legal analysis with complete citations to primary authorities and recent case law. All sections address the specific requirements, strategic considerations, and procedural frameworks governing workers' compensation trial proceedings in Northern California and statewide.