

Can you and your employees identify on-the-job safety hazards?

Five municipal/county workers died on-the-job in 2003

by Debra Chester

Often, people don't think that they work in a setting where they could be killed while at work. Some don't think that their jobs are "risky" and perceive that other work-related settings are "riskier," like working on a construction site or working on a farm or in a factory. Sadly, most work settings have the potential for a work-related death. In 2003, two municipal department of public works (DPW) employees and three county road commission employees went to work and did not return home.

The employees who did not return home:

- A 37-year-old DPW employee was electrocuted while attempting to read a water meter located near ground level and behind an apartment boiler. It is unknown if the boiler's low water cutoff switch cover was on or off of the switch when the victim tried to maneuver between the switch and the boiler to read the water meter. During his attempt to read the meter, his chest contacted the 120-volt energized low water cut-off switch terminals.



A 37-year-old DPW worker was electrocuted in this boiler room while attempting to read a water meter.

- A 62-year-old DPW employee was run over by a $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton pickup truck equipped with a snowplow as he was exiting to open the overhead garage door. The truck was stopped but the gears had not been shifted to "park". He lost his balance, fell, and was run over by the truck as he tried to get back into the truck when it began to roll.

- A 35-year-old electrician was killed when the boom supporting the vehicle-mounted aerial work platform he was working from was struck by a semi truck passing underneath it. The electrician and his partner were changing lights in an overhead traffic signal above a traffic intersection.
- A 49-year-old snowplow/salt-truck driver died after being struck by a road grader in a road equipment storage facility. Outside mirrors are not required on special purpose vehicles, such as a grader, which are exempt under the Motor Vehicle Code. The employer had a written policy in place about not approaching operating heavy equipment.
- A 40-year-old truck driver was cold patching a roadway between two dump trucks. He was struck from behind by the trailing truck and pushed into the leading truck.

How could such accidents happen?

The Michigan Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (MIFACE) research program gathered information about each of these deaths. MIFACE identified two underlying causes:

1. Inadequate health and safety training for employees.

Although providing health and safety training to employees may seem to be a simplistic and obvious recommendation, each of the individuals who died had not received appropriate training.

Even after safety training, there is no guarantee that safe practices will be followed. Job demands and

previous use of shortcuts may be an encouragement for employees to go back to the “shortcut” way of performing the work. When management/supervisors permit, encourage, allow or fail to identify and correct these inappropriate behaviors, they reinforce that behavior and give tacit approval to the unsafe action.

2. Lack of written standard operating procedures (SOPs) or safe work procedures

The development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) or safe work practices improves employee training and provides a safer work environment by assessing job hazards and risks and developing methods to minimize the identified hazards/risks.

The people who are directly affected by the safe work procedure should be involved in its development and implementation. A system to periodically update the procedure also needs to be in place.

Conclusion

Each of these fatalities could have been avoided if the employees had had a thorough understanding of how to recognize the presence and risk associated with the safety hazard at the time of the incident, a procedure to follow when a hazard is assessed, and the protective measures each could have taken to minimize the risk associated with the hazard.

More information about the MIFACE research program may be found on the Michigan State University Occupational and Environmental website at www.chm.msu.edu/oem. ♦

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