Working Alone Utilities / Municipalities



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

600,000 Americans work in the utilities sector as of March 2015.

Many of these utility workers work at water treatment plants. These facilities are often in remote locations away from the base of operations. Often these utility workers at these remote locations have shifts where they are alone.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

A lone worker can be anyone who works alone in a fixed facility or away from his or her typical base. At times, the definition applies to those who work alone in factories or warehouses on nights or weekends. It also applies to traveling workers in construction, utilities, maintenance and repair, agriculture, and other fields.

Lone Worker Safety

Organizations need to take steps to ensure safety for people who work alone.

A key component of worker safety is to watch out for one another, but lone work presents a fundamental challenge to watchfulness. How can someone watch a co-worker's back if that co-worker is working alone and out of sight??

Example:

An employee was injured while working alone in a far corner of the warehouse cleaning up the area for about four hours. He was exposed to moving machinery, electrical equipment, harsh chemicals, excessive noise, heat, and vermin such as spiders. In addition, we learned that this employee has hearing loss and could not hear the emergency alarm if it had sounded.

Example:

A park ranger in a national park in the western U.S. was hurt while repairing the walkway through an area of the park. He was exposed to electrical tools, running water, excessive heat (about 95 degrees that day), and heavy lifting. He was a mile or so from the ranger station without a working partner. Occasionally, a hiker would walk by, but on this hot day, that seldom happened.

Example:

A forester who did not return to the camp one day after being in the forest by himself. No one missed him until the next day when he did not show up for work because he lived alone. After checking with relatives and his favorite watering holes, a search team was sent out. Several days later the search team found the worker’s body; he had suffered a stroke while in the woods. Perhaps nothing could have been done for him, but if he had carried a communication device or other provisions had been made to account for him, the outcome may have been different.

These examples show the need for communication devices another worker co-worker, or having someone check on employees periodically.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

By law, employers have a responsibility to protect their workers regardless of whether they’re surrounded by colleagues or alone on an assignment. Organizations of all sizes can promote lone worker safety by developing policies, communicating with workers, and using available technology to track worker location and movement.

Identifying hazards, assessing risks and establishing preventive control measures comprise the essence of procedures and policies dealing with lone worker safety.

The bottom line is that employers must develop procedures protecting the welfare of their employees during working hours, especially if they’re working alone in isolated areas or they’re not within calling distance of somebody. The burden falls on employers to keep their work safe.

Unless OSHA prohibits working alone, it is acceptable for employees to work alone.

Police officers and letter carries have communication devices which are reasonable prevention should something go wrong.

But most fixed site jobs in factories, warehouses, and buildings expose employees to hazards when there may not be other people around. When this is the case, a Work Alone policy should be developed.

Work Alone Policy incorporates recommended procedures:

- Specify that employees must carry a radio, cell phone, walkie-talkie, man-down indicator, global positioning device, satellite telephone, etc.
- Specify how often and to whom the employee must call in to say that all is well. Many employers who have such a policy require communications every hour, and in some cases, every 15 minutes. This should be based on the severity of the hazard.
- Conduct risk assessments to determine if work may be done safely by lone workers.
- Train lone workers on emergency response.
- Establish a clear action plan in the event of an emergency.
- Set limits for what is permissible during lone work.
- Require supervisors to make periodic visits to observe lone workers.
- Ensure regular contact between lone workers and supervisors via phone or radio.
- Use automatic warning devices that alert others if signals are not received periodically from a lone worker.
- Verify that lone workers have returned to fixed base or home after completing a task.
- Specifying when an employee must sign in and out on a work log so that someone will know that the employee is out working alone.
- Planning a response to an emergency.

The organization or work entity is not finished after a Work Alone procedure is developed for monitoring lone workers. There must be constant evaluation.

For example:

What has changed in the work environment? New people, new processes, new equipment, need to reevaluated and taken into consideration. What hazards may be present now that were not before?

FINAL WORD

Development of a Work Alone Policy and Program must be continually updated and monitored with respect to new people, new processes, new equipment and new hazards.