New Jersey Carpenter Dies in Fall From Scaffold in Massachusetts

Investigation: # 96-MA-029-01

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SUMMARY

On June 25, 1996, a 36 year old male carpenter fell approximately seven feet from a tubular welded scaffold used as a shoring tower at a roof renovation job at a public ice skating rink. At the time of the incident, the victim and several co-workers were standing on a the framework of a scaffold being used to support the wooden arch roof beams of the rink. They had climbed on the scaffold to remove a horizontal member which was blocking the path of a forktruck. While unclamping the bar, the victim began to shake noticeably and fell head first to the concrete surface below. Co-workers immediately called for an ambulance which arrived within minutes. The victim was soon transported to a local city hospital where he was admitted and survived for four days before succumbing to his injuries.

To prevent future similar occurrences, the FACE Program Director concluded that employers should:

not allow employees who are impaired by sickness to work at heights.

INTRODUCTION

On July 5, 1996, the MA FACE Program was notified by a city clerk through the hotline of the death of a male carpenter on June 29. An investigation was immediately initiated.

On July 10, 1996, the MA FACE Program Field Investigator traveled to the incident scene and interviewed the project foreman. The death certificate, OSHA data, witness interviews and multiple photographs were obtained during the course of the investigation.

The employer was a national structural wood erection company in business for approximately thirty years at the time of the incident. The company employed twenty persons nationally as carpenters and office positions. Nine of these employees, all of whom were carpenters, were on the jobsite at the time of the incident. Safety responsibilities were assigned to one of the employees on-site and written company safety policies and procedures were in place at the time of the incident.

The victim was employed by the company for approximately twelve years at the time of his death. He, together with his co-workers, were on this jobsite for approximately two

weeks when the incident occurred. In addition to on the job training, the victim's background included training in personal protective equipment use, machinery/equipment and hazard identification. Working at heights on a regular basis, the victim and his co-workers were familiar with fall hazards and the use of fall protection equipment.

INVESTIGATION

On June 25, 1996, a crew of eight carpenters were in their third week of renovating a wooden structural framework on an ice hockey rink. The out-of-state company specialized in this type of work and typically the workers would stay in motels for the duration of the job.

The wood formed an arc approximately forty feet high in the center. The arc was joined at the center by metal plates. The scope of work included removing and replacing the wooden arc which made up the walls and roof of the structure. While the men were working on the wood structure itself, they were protected from falls by an elaborate fall arrest system.

The wood is covered by polyethylene roof panels, which had been removed by another contractor. A crane company was subcontracted to lift the laminated wood sections from the roof.

A number of tubular welded scaffolds had been erected by a subcontracted scaffold company to support the wooden arc while it was being disassembled and re-assembled. The scaffold towers extended the length of the building. Bars were clamped between scaffolds to maintain rigidity. Occasionally these bars had to be removed so that forktrucks could move around between the scaffolds. The bars were at various heights form the floor. Some were as low as ten feet.

On the day of the incident, work began at approximately 6:30 am. The victim arrived and informed his foreman that he was not feeling well and had been sick through the night The foreman assigned him work that would not involve being high off the ground. Therefore, the victim was performing various tasks as necessary around the site. At the time of the incident, approximately 11:40 am, the victim and a co-worker had climbed approximately 7 feet up the side of a scaffold, in order to remove the clamp holding one of the bars which was in the way of the forktrucks.

Witnesses report that while the victim was standing on a horizontal brace of the scaffold**,** he began to shake. He then fell to the concrete floor below, striking his head. His hard-hat remained on his head throughout. He feel about a foot or two away from the scaffold.

Emergency medical services were summoned and arrived within 8 minutes. The victim was transported to a local emergency room. He was hospitalized for four days before succumbing to his injuries.

The investigation revealed that the scaffold was not excessively slippery at the time of the incident.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The medical examiner listed the cause of death as multiple traumatic injuries.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: Employers should not allow employees who are impaired by sickness to work at heights.

Discussion: In this case, the employer recognized that the victim was “:under the weather” and not quite up to performing his usual job tasks. The victim was not allowed to climb to the roof of the structure. Many construction, and other, jobs do not provide “sick time” and therefore an employee who does not work does not get paid. This situation makes it difficult for an employer to send home an employee who is willing work, but whose condition may impair his performance.

What many people do not realize is that serious, including fatal, falls may occur at any height. The risk of falling is greatly enhanced by dizziness or nausea caused by illness. Employers have the difficult task of judging whether an employee is too sick to work. Unfortunately in this case, the victim would have been better off had his employer not allowed him to work or had strictly kept him from climbing.

REFERENCES

American National Standards Institute, Scaffolding - safety requirements, ANSI A10.80-1988
Code of Federal Regulations, Labor 29 Parts 1***926.452(y)(11); 1926.451(a)(15)***