

**TO:Director, Occupational Health Surveillance Program,  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health,**

**FROM:Massachusetts Fatality Assessment and Control  
Evaluation (MA FACE) Program Field Investigator**

**SUBJECT:Self-Employed General Contractor Dies in Fall  
From Ladder in Massachusetts 93-MA-01**

**DATE:February 15, 1994**

---

### **SUMMARY**

On November 19, 1992, a 58 year old, male, self-employed general contractor died of injuries sustained in an approximate six foot fall from a portable step ladder on the previous day. Periodically retained by a private Massachusetts college to perform small odd jobs, the victim was repairing an acoustical lecture hall ceiling from the sixth or seventh step of the ladder when the incident occurred. Apparently losing his balance or grip, the victim fell backwards and struck the rear of his head on the armrest of a firmly anchored theater chair. The victim's brother, an occasional employee who was present when the fall occurred, briefly tended to the victim prior to summoning help. Emergency medical services (EMS) arrived within approximately five minutes, and transported the victim to a nearby medical center, where he died the following morning from his injuries. The Massachusetts FACE Investigator concluded that in order to prevent similar future occurrences self employed contractors should:

- develop written safety rules and procedures to protect their employees and themselves on the job, including but not limited to personal protection equipment, tool safety, and fall protection.

In addition, government agencies and trade associations should:

- consider developing regional safety training programs aimed at disseminating pertinent safety information to individual contractors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

On November 20, 1992, the Massachusetts FACE Program was notified through its 24 hour hotline that a 58 year old, male, self-employed general contractor had died from injuries sustained in a fall from a ladder the day before. An investigation was immediately initiated.

On November 24, 1992, the MA FACE Investigator accompanied by a Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries Inspector, travelled to the fatality site and interviewed college representatives. It was not possible to interview the victim's brother, who was present when the fall occurred. The death certificate, EMS records, police reports, company articles of organization, Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries investigation report, and multiple photographs were obtained during the course of the investigation.

The employer (victim) was a self-employed general contractor in business for almost 17 years. The victim's brother was the sole periodic employee of the company. Apparently, there were no written company safety rules or policies.

## **INVESTIGATION**

On November 18, 1992, a self-employed general contractor was performing repairs on a damaged acoustical ceiling in a lecture hall at a small private Massachusetts college. The ceiling was approximately fourteen feet high. The contractor (victim) was self-employed and had performed many odd jobs at the college over the course of two years.

At the time of the incident, the victim and his brother were repairing the suspended wooden acoustical ceiling which had become detached from one of its supports. The brother did not witness the fall, and could only speculate why the incident occurred.

Moments prior to the fall, the victim's brother was setting up a floor jack to be used in lifting the suspended ceiling back into position. Apparently, and for unknown reasons, the victim ascended the twelve foot step ladder to make repairs carrying a short two inch by four inch lumber remnant. Upon reaching the sixth or seventh step of the ladder, he apparently lost his grip or footing and fell backwards striking the rear of his head on a firmly anchored theater chair below.

The victim's brother briefly tended to the victim prior to summoning help. Emergency medical services arrived within approximately five minutes, and transported the victim to a nearby medical center where he died from his injuries the following morning.

## **CAUSE OF DEATH**

The Medical Examiner listed the cause of death as intracerebral hemorrhage due to, or as a consequence of, skull fracture.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION**

Recommendation #1: Self-employed contractors should develop written safety rules and procedures to protect their employees and themselves on the job, including but not limited to personal protection equipment, tool safety, and fall protection.

Although OSHA does not require the self-employed to develop their own safety programs,

individual contractors should generate safety rules and procedures for each job they do; these safety procedures should be based on the relevant OSHA standards. In this case, ladder safety, fall hazards, and head protection (among other concerns, such as tool safety and electrical hazards) were important safety issues to be considered during the planning for the ceiling repair work at the college. If the victim had had a working knowledge of ladder safety, he may not have chosen to ascend the ladder while he was carrying an object. Although we will never know what caused the victim to fall, it is likely that he lost his balance in part because he was climbing the ladder with an object in his hand.

Recommendation #2: Government agencies and trade associations should consider developing regional safety training programs aimed at disseminating pertinent safety information to individual contractors.

Many small contractors are unaware of the relevant OSHA safety standards which apply to their line of work. Because these individuals are difficult to reach, and are at a high risk of suffering from a workplace fatal injury<sup>1</sup>, government agencies and/or trade associations should explore the feasibility of developing regional safety training programs for these workers. Relevant OSHA or state safety standards, basic safety information, and information on how to choose, and where to obtain, personal protective equipment should be covered in such a safety program. If a concerted effort were made to convey important safety information to self-employed contractors, the number of fatal injuries in this group might diminish.

## **REFERENCES**

1. 1992 Bureau of Labor Standards, Occupational Fatalities (need exact citation)