Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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NIOSH Issues Nationwide Alert on Dangers of Working from Scaffolds

NIOSH UPDATE:

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Contact: Fred Blosser (NIOSH) (202) 260-8519

On September 5, 1992, a 45-year-old masonry worker fell 50 feet to his death from a scaffold in New York.

On September 8, 1992, a 34-year-old painter plunged 364 feet from a bridge in Pennsylvania when a scaffolding cable broke. He was killed instantly.

On October 2, 1992, two bricklayers, age 35 years and 50 years, fell 47 feet to their deaths when the plywood on their scaffold gave way at a construction site in Missouri.

On October 27, 1992, a construction worker fell 13 feet when a scaffold collapsed in North Dakota. Fortunately, he was wearing a safety harness which prevented serious injury.

Tragically, these incidents are neither unusual nor unique. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports that falls are a leading cause of traumatic occupational death. For the period 1980-1985, the NIOSH National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities (NTOF) database indicates that 3,491 workers fell to their deaths while trying to earn a living. Of those workers identified, 461 (17%) fell while working from a scaffold.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) promulgated regulations in 1971 to protect workers in both general industry and construction from the hazards of working from scaffolds. Yet Americans continue to die each and every year in falls from scaffolds which could have been prevented. OSHA is currently revising the construction industry safety regulations addressing all types of scaffolds. NIOSH has recently issued an “Alert” to warn workers about the dangers of death and injury caused by falls from suspension scaffolds, one particularly hazardous type of scaffold.

The Alert, entitled “Request for Assistance in Preventing Worker Injuries and Deaths Caused by Falls From Suspension Scaffolds,” focuses on six deaths due to falls from suspension scaffolds. These deaths were investigated by NIOSH under the Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) program. The Alert describes the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the six workers and the crucial prevention steps which could have saved their lives.

The cases reported in the Alert represent only a small percentage of the actual deaths caused annually by falls from scaffolds in the United States. To prevent future deaths and injuries, workers must be told of the hazards they face and the means of prevention. The following page summarizes the key information in the NIOSH Alert. NIOSH urgently requests your assistance in disseminating this information to those at risk.

Preventing Worker Injuries and Deaths Caused by Falls From Suspension Scaffolds

Who is at risk?

Workers who use suspension scaffolds are at risk. Suspension scaffolds are defined as one or more working platforms suspended by ropes, or other means, from an overhead structure.

Why are workers dying?

Workers are in danger of falling from suspension scaffolds. Falls frequently occur as the result of improper installation or operation of scaffold equipment, defective scaffold equipment, insufficient worker safety training, or failure to provide or use personal fall protection equipment. None of the deaths described in this Alert would have occurred if the existing and proposed OSHA regulations for the safe use of scaffolds had been followed.

How can workers be protected?

The following precautions should be taken to prevent serious injuries and fatal falls while working from suspension scaffolds:

Comply with current and proposed OSHA regulations for working with scaffolds. Proposed regulations include requirements for all scaffolds regarding capacity, construction, access, use, and fall protection.

Assure that design and construction of scaffolds conform with OSHA regulations.

Shield scaffold suspension ropes and body belt or harness system droplines (lifelines) from hot or corrosive processes, and protect them from sharp edges or abrasion.

Inspect all scaffolds, scaffold components, and personal fall protection equipment before each use.

Provide personal fall protection equipment and make sure that it is used by all workers on suspension scaffolds. When working from a scaffold, always use fall protection (both guardrail systems and body belt or harness systems).

Use structurally sound portions of buildings or other structures to anchor droplines for body belt or harness systems and tiebacks for suspension scaffold support devices.

Secure droplines and tiebacks to separate anchor points on structural members.

Provide proper training for all workers who use any type of suspension scaffold or fall protection equipment. If you work from a scaffold, participate in any training programs offered by your employer.

Follow scaffold manufacturers' guidance regarding the assembly, rigging, and use of scaffolds.

NIOSH Alerts....

NIOSH issues Alerts in response to immediate occupational health hazards. The Alerts are designed to inform workers that they are at risk and to propose ways of reducing that risk. Prevention of hazardous conditions cannot occur unless workers are in fact aware of hazards and how to avoid them. To accomplish this task, NIOSH Alerts request the assistance of health and safety officials, editors of appropriate trade journals, and employers in the effort to inform workers and implement recommendations. It is the goal of the Institute that through dissemination of these warnings, occupational injury and disease will be prevented.

The above information is a summary of the key points in the Alert. For copies of the Alert [Publication number DHHS (NIOSH) 92-108], write or fax requests to: NIOSH Publications Dissemination 4676 Columbia Parkway Cincinnati, OH 45226 FAX: 513-533-8573

For information about this or other occupational safety and health concerns, call toll free: 1-800-35-NIOSH.

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