

The Safety Crisis In Construction



BY: JON KOKOSZKA, ASP, CWPC, INJURY PREVENTION & WORKSITE WELLNESS CONSULTANT, A.I.M. MUTUAL

THE GOOD news is that workplace injury rates are on the decline, generally speaking, thanks largely to improvements in safety measures. The bad news? Construction risks are making little headway. Fall protection in construction still tops the list of OSHA's most frequently cited violations, with training also making the list at number eight. What's more, falls were the leading cause of death in construction in 2016 and, not surprisingly, the cause of most construction-related injuries.

A.I.M. Mutual's own data backs the national numbers. Some of our most serious and costly claims occur as a result of an employee fall at a construction jobsite. These accidents can happen quickly and end with catastrophic results. Injury prevention in construction, as in all industries, is a priority for us as a workers' compensation insurer. It starts with education and communication.

Over the course of 26 years, I have worked with a number of small- to medium-sized construction contractors in all of the building trades. As part of an overall plan, I often conduct a job survey designed to help employers recognize and control potential safety and health hazards at their worksites. The survey also assists in improving a company's safety and health efforts. Together we look to reduce, minimize, or eliminate workplace hazards and risks that could potentially lead to an employee accident and a workers' compensation claim.

There are no surprises when I arrive to conduct a jobsite safety survey, yet I sometimes see construction workers without proper fall protection equipment. Whatever the reason—oversight, cost, lack of training, or a rush to meet a deadline—it's never acceptable. I always reiterate to clients that compliance is for their benefit and for the welfare of their employees, invoking Ben Franklin: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

The construction contractor's main concern on the jobsite should be the safety and well-being of employees. There are three basic steps in OSHA's Fall Prevention Campaign:

1. Plan Ahead

Estimating the cost of a job needs to include the cost of safety equipment. And be sure it's available on day one. Plan projects with safety in mind.

2. Provide The Right Equipment

Construction employees working at heights of six feet or greater above a lower level must use fall protection. They must also use it at heights of less than six feet when working near dangerous equipment. Fall protection must be provided whether the work is conducted by a general contractor, self-employed contractor, subcontractor, or an individual worker. Choose the right kinds of ladders, scaffolds, and safety gear, depending on the job. Consider a Personal Fall Arrest System (PFAS), designed to safely stop a fall before the worker strikes a lower level. It has three major components: an anchorage to which the lanyard's snap hook is attached; a full-body harness worn by the worker; and a connector, such as a lanyard or lifeline, linking the harness to the anchorage.

3. Train Employees

Training must include how to recognize fall hazards and how to minimize them. If using a PFAS, for instance, be sure it fits and inspect it. Training must include how to inspect, erect/disassemble, and maintain the fall protection equipment involved in the work. Retraining and documentation are required.

Don't take chances. In 2018, following an employee's fatal fall, a Massachusetts contractor was cited for exposing workers to falls and other hazards and was fined the maximum allowed by law. Ultimately you are responsible for providing safe and healthful workplaces for your employees. ▀



ABOUT JON KOKOSZKA

JON KOKOSZKA has been an Injury Prevention & Worksite Wellness Consultant with A.I.M. Mutual for more than 26 years. He specializes in a number of industries, including construction. He holds professional designations as an Associate Safety Professional as well as a Certified Wellness Program Coordinator.