

Fire Scene Safety - Your Call on OSHA

Information about fire scene safety: Fire Scene Safety presents risks for fire investigators and insurance adjusters.

You may be accountable to your state Department of Labor and to Federal OSHA standards.

OSHA can be your best friend or your worst enemy depending on your procedure. If someone is hurt you may be accountable to your state Department of Labor and the Federal OSHA Standards. Most states are OSHA compliant. All companies should be fully aware of OSHA and work with the standards.

Companies both large and small should familiarize themselves with OSHA standards. A safety officer should be appointed to oversee procedures both in house and at a fire site. The hazardous communication policy should comply to Title 29 Code of Federal Regulations 1910.1200. A list of MSD's etc should be provided. MSD sheets should be obtained after a fire from commercial occupants. In major fires we use a team approach with a designated safety officer. Every employee should be given a copy of the procedural SOP policy for your organization. It should be signed for and reviewed on a regular basis.

Over the past several years we have repeatedly called the attention of fire investigators and insurance adjusters to basic safety procedures at a fire site. We include insurance adjusters in this category because they often go to fire scenes and other losses oblivious to basic safety.

We caution women who are pregnant to be extremely careful about entering a fire site environment. The problems potentially are many fold. Older houses have lead paint. Some houses have asbestos from pipes or other insulating material. The problem is exaggerated when the building has been sealed and heat introduced to keep the pipes from freezing.

A rent situation in Albany New York brings to mind the problem of Carbon Monoxide. Investigators were working in a building. Small propane heaters were utilized to provide heat. About an hour into the investigation there were complaints of being tired by several investigators. The cause was the build up of CO in the warm and cozy building. The effects of CO are cumulative and should not be taken lightly.

Along with the CO₂ problem is the problem of "confined spaces". Fire fighters understand the term and practice on a regular basis regarding these spaces. For the investigator suffice it to say that entering a closed area (tunnel like, basement closet, etc) without knowing the quality of the air could be fatal.

Common sense goes a long way in investigating a fire. Remember that structurally the building is unsafe. Often in the Northeast the matter is complicated by ice conditions from fire department activity. Everyone jokingly tells the story of "how they almost fell through the floor". Take that scenario one step further. The temperature is ten degrees (f) and you fall. Unlike the little old lady that pushes a button and says "help I can't get up". you have no one to call. In many rural areas you could be there for a while. You could be a candidate for Cryogenics without electing it.

Common sense would call for a two man team in investigating a fire. The second person can be simply a helper but safety calls out for common sense. It is only a matter of time until we see a tragedy for adjusters and investigators.

There is no substitute for particulate masks. We are not speaking here about a surgical mask but are speaking of a genuine particulate mask with a filter system. If after a fire you blow your nose and see the "black ash stuff" that is accumulated you know that mother nature is not happy about

putting ash in your lungs and body. In line with OSHA standards the masks should be relevant to the purpose. There should be a mask policy and each person should be given a mask that is properly fitted and not just taken off the junk pile and handed out.

Along with the mask basic adjuster or investigator tools should include coveralls. These coveralls should not be laundered with the rest of the family clothing. Especially the baby clothes. They should be considered contaminated and washed alone. Along with that precaution we suggest that shoes worn at a fire site or a lab be removed before coming into your home. Little children tend to put their mouths on the carpet. The oil, grease, and unknown debris on your cleaned shoes is not a vitamin to kids.

Medical facilities with or residences with persons who are ill present a particular challenge. Red bag material should be avoided. The use of gloves is essential. If there is a potential for needles to be present double glove with surgical gloves and heavy gloves. With the advent of short hospital stays we are seeing more medical contaminants in residences.

Most X Ray systems are not dangerous. Those containing radioactive material should be monitored closely. Generally the manufacturer or the local Haz Mat Team are a source of information of the units.

Companies should know their OSHA requirements and implement a safety program for employees. Anyone exposed to a hazardous material should report it to the management. Management has some very specific requirements about record keeping and follow up.

Safety is no longer an after thought. It is a primary responsibility of any insurance adjuster, their company and investigators. Simply providing a hard hat with a nice logo on it and a flashlight is no substitute for long term safety.

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