Cold Weather Hazards

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Dealing with snow and ice removal are the prime hazards for custodian or maintenance workers in winter weather. Also, for those people who get caught up in snow removal on an hoc basis. Staying safe by using sound work practices in winter conditions, has its challenges.

WHAT’S THE DANGER?

Workers and all custodian workers working outside have to reminded of the risk and dangers inherent in their work. Hypothermia a dangerous lowering of the body’s core temperature can occur if proper dress procedures are not observed. One has heard of stories of people suffering heart attacks and dying when shoveling snow. There are the usual back injuries because of ill-advised shoveling techniques.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

What all winters custodians and maintenance workers need to know:

- Staying warm and dry are important for preventing hypothermia. Dress in layers of clothing, so you can remove outerwear if you get too warm. Keep dry by using waterproof footwear and clothing, and keep a change of socks and gloves handy in case yours get wet. In severely cold weather, protect your hands, toes and cheeks from freezing which will cause the tissue damage known as frostbite.
- Take it easy when you shovel snow by hand because of the possibilities of back injury and heart attack. Push, rather than lift, snow when possible. If the snow is wet and heavy, take smaller loads. Take frequent breaks, keep from getting too warm and drink water often to replace fluid and minerals lost by sweating.

Another important aspect of winter work is dealing with snow removal equipment.

- Check over equipment such as a snowblower before use to make sure it is functioning properly and safety guards are in place. Don’t run gasoline-powered equipment indoors because of the danger of carbon monoxide exposure. Do a circle check of plows and other mobile equipment to look for problems and obstructions?
- Keep people away from the area where you start or operate the machine. Shift into neutral and make sure all clutches are disengaged before starting the motor.
- Walk slowly and carefully so you don’t slip, and keep a firm hold on the machine. If you try to remove snow too quickly, you’ll overload the machine. Stay away from the discharge opening to prevent entanglement or being struck by objects propelled by the blades. Do not use a snow thrower on steep slopes. Make sure you don’t hit obstructions such as curbs or tree roots.
- Never put your hand in any part of the equipment while the machine is running. First turn off the engine, wait for all moving parts to stop and disconnect the spark plug wire so the machine can’t accidentally start up. Use a tool, never your fingers, to remove any snow or ice buildup.

FINAL WORD

Before using heating devices such as torches for thawing frozen utilities make sure you understand and observe all safety precautions. Learn your employer’s procedures for winter emergencies such as storms and power outages. You might have to assume extra duties in these situations but protect your own safety and health while helping others.