Confined Space Entry – No Permit Required for Municipalities Fatality File

Three underground utility workers in Florida died Monday after entering a confined space without the proper personal protective equipment or gas monitoring equipment.

The incident, which occurred in Key Largo, Fla., began when the first man removed a manhole cover, entered a 15-foot-deep drainage hole and became unresponsive, according to news reports.

The second worker entered with the intention of saving him but also lost consciousness. Likewise, a third man climbed into the hole was overcome by gas. All three workers perished. None were wearing respiratory protective equipment.

The three men were identified as Elway Gray, 34, Louis O'Keefe, 49, and Robert Wilson, 24. A fourth worker was treated for exposure and dizziness but survived.

Residents living nearby complained to local news outlets about a "rotten egg smell" that had been lingering in the area for months. A sewage back-up in the area likely caused the buildup of hydrogen sulfide and methane gases, according to reports.

Monroe County Sheriff's Office evacuated five homes close to where the incident occurred as a precaution, but residents were later allowed to return home.

The contractor for the project, Douglas N. Higgins Inc., previously has been cited by OSHA in 2002 for lack of a confined space program. The company paid $1,875 in fines, which were reduced from $2,500.

The agency currently is investigating the deaths to determine if Higgins, a private contractor hired by the county for the road project, did not follow its Confined Space standard.