Electric Equipment Guarding and Workspaces Fatality File

A suburban man lost his life — and his nephew lost his arms — from an improperly installed ComEd wire. State regulators can’t guarantee it won’t happen again.

In the final moments of his life, Robert Zulauf administered CPR to his nephew and ordered bystanders to move away from the deadly power line that arced and bowed just a few feet from a Circle K parking lot.

Flames danced around Jordan Zulauf as thick black smoke billowed and his uncle worked to save him. Above the men, a Commonwealth Edison line crackled and hummed so loudly it could be heard over both an approaching police siren and the screams of horrified onlookers. “911! 911!” Robert shouted to police officers as they arrived on the scene. “I’ve got one hurt!”

Robert took a few steps toward his white utility truck, which he had parked along the road so he and Jordan could work on the telecommunication lines several feet below the ComEd wires. The bucket was extended about 6 feet off the ground and, according to one witness, a wire was touching its long metal arm. Robert touched the truck. His body went rigid and he fell to the ground. He instantly burst into flames.

Robert, 32, was pronounced dead at the scene. His 23-year-old nephew, Jordan, was flown from the northern Illinois town of Sterling to Rockford, where doctors amputated his arms and he remained in a coma for several weeks.

At the time of Robert Zulauf’s death on Nov. 8, 2016, his wife,

Jeanette, was seven months pregnant with their third child. Besides her two school-age children, she would soon become the primary caretaker to a newborn and an adult nephew who had to relearn even the most basic skills.

“Robert knew what he was doing. There’s no reason this should have happened,” Jeanette Zulauf recently told the Tribune. “I keep asking, how does a man who put safety above anything else related to his job end up electrocuted?” It’s a question that both ComEd and the state agency that oversees the power company have fought hard against answering.

The Illinois Commerce Commission — the government entity charged with ensuring reliable, efficient and safe utility services to the public — did not conduct its own investigation of Robert Zulauf’s death. Instead, court records show regulators relied upon ComEd’s findings, a tightly held report in which the utility apparently cleared itself of wrongdoing.

The ICC has refused to release records related to the power company’s investigation to the Tribune, citing a state law exempting the documents from the Freedom of Information Act. The agency also resisted turning over those records in lawsuits filed by both Jeanette and Jordan Zulauf until a Cook County judge ordered it to do so this past summer.

While the judge prohibited those records from being shared with the public, ComEd engineers testified that one of several wires connected to the pole was not properly insulated. It’s a potentially fatal, easily avoided flaw that has plagued power lines across the state for years, but a Tribune investigation found the ICC has done little to ensure that politically influential power companies address the public safety risk.