Meter Reader Killed By Gases

An industrial water meter reader was reported missing when he failed to return to headquarters at the end of his shift. Meanwhile, a passerby saw him lying face-down in a few inches of water at the bottom of an underground meter vault. Emergency workers tried to revive him but were not successful.

Investigators detected natural gas in the atmosphere of the chamber, and later found a leak in a nearby natural gas pipeline. An autopsy revealed cause of death to be suffocation due to inhalation of methane and carbon monoxide. It appeared the worker had collapsed hours before he was missed at the end of the workday.

Many safety precautions were missing in this situation. The meter reader should have had training in confined space entry procedures and respiratory protection. Because this worker had health problems, he might not have been approved for work in a confined space with a respirator. The vault should have been tested for the presence of toxic and explosive gases and lack of oxygen, and it should have been ventilated. In addition, the manhole covers in this particular work area were supposed to have holes to allow ventilation, but this one did not. The worker should have been instructed not to enter a vault without the correct cover. Finally, the worker had no backup and no communication with anyone when he entered this dangerous situation alone.