Police Officer Among Fatalities

Three sanitation workers and one policeman died in an underground sewage pumping station.

Two sanitation workers had entered the room 50 feet underground and attempted to unbolt an inspection plate from a valve. The plate blew off and the underground room filled with raw sewage. Neither worker was wearing a respirator or other protective gear.

One was overcome by sewer gas and the other exited the chamber to call the police for help. He entered the underground chamber again and was also overcome. Then a police officer entered the chamber, followed by a sanitation worker supervisor. None returned to the surface.

Next into the underground shaft was a passing construction worker and another police officer, both of whom escaped with difficulty. None of the rescuers so far were wearing respiratory protection.

Two volunteer firefighters then entered the space with self-contained breathing equipment. Finally, the bodies of the original victim and three would-be rescuers were extricated from the pumping station.

Confined space fatalities are doubly tragic because they are often brave people attempting to rescue someone. In this case, five rescuers went in without respiratory protection and just two escaped. Emergency personnel such as police officers should be trained to recognize the hazards of confined spaces and should also understand that only fully trained and properly-equipped people should enter such a space.