Too Young to Die

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A 14-year-old Hispanic laborer who said he was 18 in order to get a job was partially decapitated and suffered multiple crushing injuries after he came in contact with a machine used to shred and grind plastic bags into a recyclable product.

The incident took place at a plastics recycling plant where 29 of the 31 employees were Hispanic and spoke primarily Spanish. Safety training was provided by a bilingual office worker with no formal safety training. However the worker left the company before the victim was hired and had not been replaced. The two other workers, a plant manager and mechanic, spoke only English.

No one is sure exactly how the incident occurred but investigators believe the rotor blade in the machine may have become jammed and that the victim may have climbed into the machine to unjam it. The victim was working alone at the time and it is believed another worker, unaware anyone was in the machine, may have come back, noticed the machine was not running and started it. The victim was discovered sometime later by a co-worker who saw the body at the bottom of the machine and called 911. Emergency personnel responded but the boy was already dead.

Safe work procedures and training must be provided to workers in a language they understand. Employees who do not speak fluent English should request that written and verbal training be provided in their native language. It is also important that tasks requiring two workers never be undertaken alone. Many fatalities and serious injuries have occurred in environmental care industries including recycling and trash handling.

Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program, Report 2005-05