Working Alone Procedure Review

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

“Watch Out For One Another”

Lone work presents a fundamental challenge to watchfulness. How can someone watch a colleague’s back if that colleague is working alone and out of sight?

A lone worker can be anyone who works alone in a fixed facility or away from his or her typical base. At times, the definition applies to those who work alone in factories or warehouses on nights or weekends. It also applies to traveling workers in construction, utilities, maintenance and repair, agriculture, and other fields.

WHAT’S THE DANGER?

IS WORKING ALONE DANGEROUS, OR, AT LEAST A PROBLEM?

While it is not always hazardous to work alone, it can be when other circumstances are present. Whether a situation is a high or low risk will depend on:

- the location.
- type of work.
- interaction with the public.
- consequences of an emergency, incident, injury.

Workers working alone may be concerned that if they become seriously injured, the absence of others around them may prevent them from receiving immediate, possibly life-saving treatment. The cause of such an emergency can vary; whether it is a workplace injury, personal illness, or personal harm as a result of robbery or assault.

THE RISKS

Exposure to violence and poor access to emergency assistance are the two main hazards of working alone. However, these hazards can also be faced by people who work with colleagues.

- Because there are no hazards which are exclusive to working alone, working alone does increase the risks of any given job. For example, an attendant working alone late at night in a 24-hour convenience store may be a greater target for exposure to violence.
- Working alone can also increase the severity of workplace injuries. A park ranger who is bitten by a snake has an increased chance of severe consequences if they are working alone rather than with colleagues who can help.
- Working alone can increase the likelihood of some workplace hazards or risks occurring and in those cases where incidents do occur, the consequences can be more severe.
- In some cases other people may be close by, such as a cleaner working by themselves in a city office building. In other cases the employee could be in a remote location, such as a researcher undertaking field work by themselves in a national park.
- It is important that as an Employer you need to understand and be adequately prepared for the challenges employees that work-alone may face.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

GENERAL

Employers have a responsibility to protect their workers regardless of whether they’re surrounded by colleagues or alone on an assignment. Organizations of all sizes can promote lone worker safety by developing policies, communicating with workers, and using available technology to track worker location and movement.

Factors in Assessing the Workplace

The following must be considered and evaluated in assessing and protecting employees who work alone.

- Length of time the person will be working alone
- Available forms of communication
- Location of the work
- Type or nature of work
- Characteristics and training of the individual who is working alone

CHECK – IN PROCEDURE

The most important step in the prevention of harm to an employee is to establish a check – in procedure.

Decide if a verbal check-in is adequate, or if the worker must be accounted for by a visual check. Make sure your plan is appropriate for both regular business hours as well as after main office hours.

For most lone workers, the telephone will be the main source of contact. If using cell phones, always be sure that it is close by and charged. If cell phone service is unreliable in your area, be sure to have alternative methods of communication available (such as use of cameras, automated warning/duress devices, global positioning systems (GPSs), two-way radio, site visits or satellite technology).

Example of a check-in procedure

- Prepare a daily work plan so it is known where the lone worker will be and when.
- Identify one main person to be the contact at the office, plus a backup.
- Define under what circumstances the lone worker will check in and how often.
- Stick to the visual check or call-in schedule. You may wish to have a written log of contact.
- Have the contact person call or visit the lone worker periodically to make sure they are okay.
- Pick out a code word to be used to identify or confirm that help is needed.

When travelling out of the office, the main contact person should know the following details:

- Estimated time of arrival.
- Return time or date.
- Contact information.
- Mode of travel (public transit, car, plane, etc.).
- Alternate plans in the event of bad weather, traffic problems, etc.

OSHA PERSPECTIVE

OSHA says employers must check on workers at regular intervals, be it once for a brief assignment or multiple times a day for a longer assignment. Means of verification include:

- Visual: Camera, in-person
- Verbal: Two-way radio (such as a walkie-talkie); in-person; intercom system

The agency says cell phones are permissible in areas where reception exists. Cell phones are not allowed when an employer cannot show that reception is available, such as below deck. Other unreliable, unacceptable forms of communication include the sound of power tools or whistles and tapping on decks, bulkheads or tank walls to check on a worker.

FINAL WORD

Organizations of all sizes can promote lone worker safety by developing policies, communicating with workers, and using available technology to track worker location and movement.