

The Long Term Effects of a Workplace Accident

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At our Annual Technical Conference at the Turning Stone Resort in May, I had the privilege of attending a session conducted by Eric Giguere, a former construction worker who was buried alive in a ditch collapse, but lived to tell his story. His story was very moving, and you could hear a pin drop in the room as roughly 200 people sat attentively on his every word. In this case, Eric had entered a ditch to prepare a drain line for repair when the ditch collapsed, Eric was buried for an extended amount of time, and was dead before his coworkers and emergency services personnel were able to remove his body from the ditch and ultimately revive his lifeless body. Listening to the presentation I realized that most of us are concerned about our safety and that of our coworkers, but we give much more consideration to the accident than we give to the long term effects it may have on the injured worker, coworkers, and the system where we are employed.

As far as workplace safety is concerned, I think the majority of us would agree that we need to do a much better job in securing our work sites and utilizing our safety equipment and training. Unfortunately, in many cases, it will take an accident before some of us ever begin to work in a safe manner. I'm not trying to be a preacher here, but there are two main goals of an operator. First, to provide a finished water or wastewater product which is either safe for human consumption or safe for the environment. Second, to go home to our families in good health at the end of each work day. Sometimes this is easier said than done.

Eric really opened my eyes, not only to the accident and how traumatic it was for him at the time of the event, but how the long term effects of this accident are still being felt nearly a decade after the actual accident. In his case, Eric suffers from short term memory loss, making it difficult at best for him to seek meaningful employment. He also suffers from severe headaches and loss of sleep attributed to a post traumatic stress type disorder. While Eric thankfully seems to be doing well now, his life has changed dramatically. He will never again work in the construction field and more importantly, he and his wife ended up getting divorced. This is an example of how a workplace accident can quickly change your life. My thanks to Eric for this presentation, and I whole heartedly recommend you all see his seminar if you ever get the chance.

God forbid, but what if an accident happened to you, or one of your coworkers? What effects would such an accident have on those involved? Let's say an accident happened, a coworker

has become incapacitated in a manhole. First and foremost, I hope you have followed safety procedures for entering a confined space and have the proper safety equipment in place to extract the injured worker. Once the employee is retrieved and medical attention is rendered, I'm sure there will be an investigation and a large amount of paperwork which needs to be handled. Are you up to date on these protocols? Next, we need to check on the well-being of our coworkers, not only the injured worker, but any workers who may have been effected by the events of the accident. Witnessing a coworker in a bad situation can have a huge impact on others. In the immediate aftermath we have one more very serious job to accomplish...we need to notify the injured workers family, UGH! The family needs to be notified asap, and they need his current status, where he is located, and will likely need transportation due to their anxiety and state of mind.

As for the long term effects of such an incident, the results may vary, depending on how serious and long lasting the injuries are. The injured employee may face a long battle with treatment and rehabilitation before returning to work. For that employee, the physical and psychological effects may take a long time to overcome. The financial burden on the employee and their family may cause undue stress as well. The remaining employees will have to deal with their feelings of guilt that the injury happened to someone else, but will in most cases also have to work harder and pick up the slack. Most water or wastewater systems could not afford to hire another employee while one is off work due to an injury. Therefore, more work and production will be required, potentially leading to a whole other set of workplace issues and difficulties. As for the employer or system, such an accident could cause a serious financial burden. Not only will the employer be concerned with the well-being of the injured employee, but now they may be faced will financial violations due to workplace safety rules and regulations. The employer may also need to make an investment in safety equipment and training of employees to prevent accidents from happening in the future. The "lost time" of the injured employee will also force the employer to either expect more from other employees or make a financial investment and hire another employee to assist until the worker can return to normal activity.

I know this is a brief overview of the effects of an accident on not only the victim, but other employees and the employer as well. Hopefully this opens some eyes and safety



protocols and procedures are followed, thus lessening the risk of a workplace accident. Here at the NYRWA, our Assistant Director, Tim Shudt, has began a much needed program of safety training for our field staff, including yours truly. Since we cover vast territories, and have to work out of our vehicles, our safety is of great concern to our management and Board of Directors. One thing I like to share at training sessions is that safety is everyone's job, and we all need to be safe on the jobsite.

Enjoy the rest of the summer and here's hoping you all stay safe and make it home happy and healthy at the end of each work day!

Last, but certainly not least, I wish to extend my most sincere wishes for a happy and healthy retirement to Mr. David Comfort from the Town of Plattsburgh Water and Sewer Department. Dave recently decided to retire, much to my dismay. Dave has done an excellent job in Plattsburgh, has fostered a great workplace and has developed some exceptional operators. I have had the pleasure of working with Dave on a few issues, and in most cases, he helped me as much or more than I ever helped him. I am very happy for Dave and his family, and I wish you all the best in retirement. You will be missed Mr. Comfort! 💧