Construction Superintendent Falls Down Elevator Shaft

A superintendent on a high-rise construction complex fell to his death after sustaining multiple injuries.

Earlier that day, this superintendent was discovered traveling without authorization in a newly installed elevator. As a result, the company installing the elevator cut off the power so the elevator doors would not automatically open. The superintendent was warned the elevator was not licensed and was not to be used by any construction personnel until it had passed the required routine government inspections.

Later that afternoon, the superintendent consumed alcohol with a co-worker. Shortly after this, the two proceeded back to the main floor lobby of the high rise where they obtained a hook device, commonly used by elevator personnel to manually unlatch elevator doors.

After using this hook to open the door, they entered the elevator and ascended to the 12th floor. Once they arrived, the superintendent set the service key switch to the off position and both co-workers left the elevator. (This key was left in the off position to hold the elevator at the same floor until they returned.) The doors then closed automatically behind them and they went on with their task. However, unknown to them, the elevator then proceeded up to the 15th floor.

A short time later, the superintendent and his co-worker returned to the elevator doors (at the 12th floor). He repeated the same procedure of unlocking the door with the hook. Using both hands he opened the door and entered, but the elevator car was gone. He fell 14 flights down the elevator shaft to his death.

Reviewing a fatality like this one is important since a job superintendent is supposed to be one individual who strictly sets and ultimately enforces the standards of safety on any jobsite.

Although this fatality was a result of safety negligence by the superintendent, the coroner’s report listed several safety steps overlooked by the elevator installation contractor. These steps included: (a) The posting of warning signs to indicate that unauthorized use of the elevators was a safety infraction. (b) Elevators under construction should be disabled and locked out from a main switch at the end of the working day. (c) Devices or keys allowing unauthorized use of elevators after hours should be secured at the end of each working day.

Accurate statistics of on-the-job incidents related to alcohol are difficult to

obtain. The real details of these incidents are often covered up with “sparing the family of any additional hardship” as the excuse. Ironically, when it comes to alcohol abuse, the family usually knows there is a problem! In this particular case the presence of alcohol was not covered up. Those individuals involved in reporting it should be commended.

Alcohol should not be allowed at any worksite, at any time of the year, even after hours. It just isn’t safe! Elevators must be used only as directed to avoid fatalities like this one.