

Newtown Tragedy Illustrates Importance of Emergency Drills



Schools used to just do fire drills. Then Columbine happened. So schools started doing lock-down or active shooter drills, too. And such drills may have prevented more deaths in the recent Newton, CT elementary school shootings.

Teachers and students at Sandy Hook Elementary School did regular fire, evacuation and lock-down drills. So as soon as the shooting started, they put the procedures they'd practiced into action.

Teachers locked classroom doors and turned off lights. Students huddled quietly under their desks or in closets, waiting for the nightmare to end.

What can workplace safety professionals take away from this tragedy? Emergency drills are important; they must be done regularly and taken seriously by everyone involved.

When companies don't do regular emergency drills and an emergency happens, workers are put in danger and can get injured or die.

Example: A fire broke out in the engine room of a small fishing vessel off BC. Two crew members tried to fight the fire but failed. They abandoned ship and issued a distress call. The vessel burned to the waterline and subsequently sank. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada's investigation report into the incident noted that the crew rarely conducted any formal emergency exercises or drills nor were there any written procedures in place for emergency drills. As a result, crew members were unfamiliar with how the firefighting equipment worked.

The report concluded that "not practising or evaluating emergency drills routinely can leave crew members at risk of being unprepared in cases of emergency."

To be blunt, if 5- and 6-year-olds can learn what to do in an emergency and then actually do it, so can your workers.