

Spot The Safety Violation: Get out of the Gutter



What's preventing these workers from falling, especially the one standing on the guttering'



Ask anyone what one of the most common causes of workplace injuries and deaths is and even a non-safety professional would probably guess falls from heights. But despite strict requirements in the OHS laws on the use of appropriate fall

protection, and educational and inspection blitzes on this hazard in especially vulnerable industries, falls keep happening and employers and workers keep taking unnecessary risks.

Case in point'this picture from the Health and Safety Executive, Great Britain's OHS regulator, which shows a window cleaner standing on guttering on the outside of a balcony parapet wall on the third floor of a nursing home. An HSE investigation found that there was no suitable edge protection or other appropriate safety measures in place.

An HSE inspector commented, 'Work being carried out in this manner was entirely avoidable. This could very easily have been a fatality. They didn't have to do the work this way. As advertised on the company's website, a 'reach and wash' system could have been used, which allows the cleaning of windows up to 65 feet.'

As a result, the window cleaning firm and its sole director were fined for health and safety violations.

7 Best Practices for Safe Window Washing

The HSE inspector was right'this situation could easily have resulted in a fatality. In fact, window washers have died in similar circumstances. For example, a 20-year-old window washer in BC was about to put on a fall arrest harness when he fell 23 floors to his death.

Because of the hazards this specialized profession faces, some jurisdictions have specific safety requirements for window cleaning. For example, Ontario has an OHS regulation dedicated to window cleaning that covers key topics such as:

- PPE, including fall protection
- Ladders and related equipment
- Scaffolds, boatswain's chairs and related equipment
- Electrical hazards, such as overhead power lines.

And according to the CSA Standard CAN/CSA-Z91-M90, Safety Code for Window Cleaning Operations, the following are seven basic best practices for doing this work safely:

1. All window cleaning should be carried out with due regard for worker safety and the safety of others.
2. Equipment shouldn't be used in high winds, inclement weather or extreme temperatures where such conditions impair safe use.
3. Window cleaning equipment, hand tools and chemical cleaning solutions must be used so as to avoid hazards to the worker and others, including passers-by, and to minimize damage to the property.
4. Where practicable, signs should be posted in sufficiently prominent locations to warn pedestrians that window cleaning is being conducted overhead.
5. Equipment and safety devices must meet the requirements of the standard, be used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions and be maintained in safe operating condition.
6. Workers doing window cleaning work must be properly trained and demonstrate their competence in the rigging and operation of the window cleaning equipment and safety devices.

7. Workers working at a height of three metres or more without the protection of guardrails must wear appropriate fall arrest protection.

Use Fall Protection Plan to Prevent Falls from Heights

Window cleaners aren't the only workers vulnerable to falls from heights. For example, workers in the construction sector are particularly vulnerable to this safety hazard. To protect any of your workers who are at risk of falling from heights, implement a fall protection plan that covers:

- The fall hazards at the workplace;
- The fall protection systems to be used, making sure to follow the hierarchy of fall protection equipment;
- The anchors to be used;
- The procedures to be used to assemble, maintain, inspect, use and disassemble the fall protection systems;
- Confirmation that the clearance distances below the work area are sufficient to prevent a worker from hitting the ground or an object or level below the work area, if applicable; and
- The rescue procedures to be used in an emergency.

Your fall protection plan should be in writing and available at the worksite to which it applies. Use this Fall Protection Plan Template to develop your plan. And ensure you train workers on it.

In addition, make sure that workers' fall protection equipment is inspected before use by a competent person for worn or damaged straps, buckles, D-rings or lines. (Use this fall protection equipment inspection checklist.)