

Worker in Philadelphia Demolition Tragedy Allegedly High on Marijuana



Several years ago, we ran a two-part series on drug and alcohol testing (Part 1 and Part 2). The articles were based on the premise that workers who are drunk or high on drugs are unsafe and pose a hazard to themselves and their co-workers.

To my surprise, a reader who's a safety manager argued that high or drunk workers aren't necessarily unsafe. In fact, he said, 'I know workers who actually work safer when they are under the influence, and are in fact quite dangerous when they are not.'

He asked for proof that workers under the influence pose a safety risk. (You can read more of his thoughts on this topic as well as the response of several members of our Board of Advisors.)

Unfortunately, a recent tragedy in Philadelphia may provide just such proof.

During demolition of a four-storey building, a wall fell on an adjacent Salvation Army thrift shop, crushing it. Six people died and 13 were injured.

The government announced plans to charge construction worker Sean Benschop with six counts of involuntary manslaughter, 13 counts of recklessly endangering another person and one count of risking a catastrophe.

Officials allege that he was using an excavator to remove a second-storey beam just seconds before the collapse. A toxicology report on blood taken from him about two hours after the collapse indicated that he had marijuana and pain killers in his system.

Benschop turned himself into the police. He has a criminal record that includes convictions for drug-related offences.

In response to this incident, Mayor Michael Nutter is calling for, among other things, random drug testing of heavy equipment operators.

UPDATE: In July 2015, Benschop pleaded guilty to six counts of involuntary manslaughter and other criminal charges. He testified against the contractor for the project and, in return, was sentenced to 7.5-15 years in prison.