Janitor Dies of CO Poisoning

At age 50, all Bob* wanted to do was make a little extra money. So he found a job as a custodian. Two weeks later he died of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning while using a propane-powered floor buffer.

Bob was trained by another worker on how to operate the buffer, but nobody told him about the hazards of carbon monoxide.

WHAT HAPPENED
The employer was a small business that provided janitorial services. Bob was hired through an employment agency and began working as a custodian in a large office building.

It was reported that Bob had used the buffer on several occasions prior to this incident. But this would be the last time he would use it. He was found unresponsive on the floor, about six feet away from the buffer, which was still idling. Investigators believe he had been exposed to carbon monoxide gas for about seven hours.

Results of a blood test discovered a 62 percent CO saturation level in Bob’s blood, which indicated asphyxiation by inhaling propane exhaust. Bob’s employer stated that the buffer is normally used with an outside door open to allow ventilation. But no external door or window was open at the jobsite that day.

WORKERS TAKE HEED
Employees should follow these recommendations to prevent similar deaths:

- Don’t use fuel-powered equipment indoors; use electric-powered equipment instead. Electric-powered floor buffers are commonly available.
- If you have to use fuel-powered equipment indoors, ensure there is adequate ventilation and carbon monoxide detectors.
- Simply opening a door or window, or running an exhaust fan will not necessarily supply adequate ventilation. Carbon monoxide can accumulate rapidly in enclosed spaces and can overcome a person without warning. That’s why it’s important to recognize the hazards of CO and the early symptoms of exposure.
- Equipment should be properly maintained in safe working condition. Maintenance includes frequent and regular replacement or cleaning of engine air filters to ensure minimum exhaust emissions.

- Get the training necessary to operate all equipment safely.

**The names aren’t real, but the incidents are. These accounts are based on actual fatality investigations.*