Straight Talk About Straight Ladder Safety

Safety Talk

Two workers were attempting to install a wooden sign board on the storefront of a building. They were both on the ground attempting to position an aluminum ladder. They lost control of it, causing the ladder to fall backwards. It struck an 8,000-volt overhead power line. The two men were electrocuted instantly.

Fatalities like this one occur all too often. The following are guidelines for the safe use of straight ladders:

Is it in good repair?

- Check the condition of the rungs, side rails and feet, and make sure that they are secure.
- A wooden ladder should not be painted, because this can hide cracks or defects. Instead, use a wood preservative or clear finish for protection.
- Check aluminum ladders for signs of loose rivets, cracks, corrosion or other damage.
- On extension ladders, make sure that ropes, pulleys and locks are in good working order.
- Check for warping and twisting in the shape of the ladder. Do not use a wooden ladder when wet because it might twist or loosen when it dries.
- Make sure the feet of the ladder are clean and will resist slipping.
- If you find a defective ladder, tag it and report it immediately so that it can be destroyed – before someone else has an accident using it.

Is it the correct ladder for the job?

- Never use a ladder made of metal such as aluminum or one with metal reinforcement for or around any electrical work.
- Make sure the ladder is strong enough to support you and your tools.
- Never use a ladder for other than its intended purpose. A ladder is not to be used as a scaffold or a gangplank. A ladder is just a short-term route for travelling up and down, and is not meant for extended or heavy work.

Is the ladder set up safely?

- Use the four in one rule to position the ladder – have the base of the ladder one foot away from the wall for every four feet in height.
- The top of the ladder should extend safely past the point of rest or landing area, usually about three feet.
- The base of the ladder must be resting on a solid, even surface. Loose gravel, mud, ice, snow, sand or a slight grade are unsafe surfaces.
- Tie or block the base of the ladder, or have someone hold it. Also have someone hold the ladder while you tie it in place at the top.
- If the ladder is to be in a traffic area, barricade it or have it guarded. This is to protect you while you are on the ladder, and for the safety of the people down below.

Are you ready to climb safely?

- Use both hands to climb. You should carry your tools on a belt or hoist them up in a basket.
- Make sure your footwear is clean – free of grease or water which could cause you to slip. Your soles should be made of non-slip material, not leather. Never use flat bottom shoes without heels!
- Never climb onto the top few rungs of a ladder.
- Do not over-reach to the side of the ladder; instead take the time to move it.

Move ladders safely:

- It may take two or more people to safely bring down a ladder.
- When moving a ladder, be particularly careful to avoid contact with wiring overhead.
- When carrying a ladder, watch the front section so that you do not run into anyone, and the back section so that it does not swing out of control.

Falls are a leading cause of workplace accidents, and fatalities involving ladders are too common.