

CWA Occupational Safety & Health Fact Sheet #25

Working With or Within Close Proximity to Power Lines/Electrical Hazards

Working with or within close proximity to electrical power lines/electrical hazards presents several unique safety and health concerns and issues for CWA members employed as telecommunications outside plant technicians. During the last several years, many CWA telecommunications technicians have suffered work-related injuries, other health problems, and fatalities, including electrocutions, while performing such work. These incidents have had a significant impact upon the Union as well as the well-being of the affected members and their families. CWA is committed to ensuring that represented employers are providing safe and healthful working conditions and working towards the prevention of telecommunications worker/member accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities.

Who has the primary responsibility for providing safe and healthful working conditions?

Of importance, let's remember the employer has the primary responsibility for providing her/his employees with working conditions "which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm." Thus, as required by the OSHA Telecommunications Standard, 29 CFR 1910.268, regarding work with or within close proximity to power lines/electrical hazards, it is the responsibility of telecommunications employers to provide:

- Appropriate work practices and procedures that will allow CWA members to perform their tasks in a safe and healthful manner,
- Appropriate education and training that will allow CWA members to complete their work in a safe and healthful manner, and
- Appropriate and necessary hand tools, related equipment, and personal protective equipment that will provide CWA members protection from, contact with, or exposure to hazardous electrical power.¹

In addition, as noted below, in order to provide protective coverage for the Union's members who work with/within close proximity to electrical hazards, we need to ensure that represented employers provide additional workplace protections not included in the OSHA Telecommunications Standard.

Working with or within close proximity to electrical power necessitates that represented employers develop work practices and procedures that include coverage of all relevant safety and health issues. For example, where the required work involves working with/within close proximity to power lines/electrical hazards—a potential imminent

¹Also, it is extremely important that affected CWA members follow all company safety and health rules and procedures, as well as, where necessary, reminding co-workers to perform assigned tasks in a safe and healthful manner.

danger situation- a second worker trained in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) should be assigned to the job/work site. Further, policies and procedures that provide for an initial investigation of working conditions should be developed and implemented to ensure there are no safety and health hazards present, e.g., the stability of utility poles and potential electrical hazards. These policies and procedures should include coverage of the safe and healthful performance of outside work during inclement weather conditions. Also, policies regarding how long it takes to complete assigned tasks should take worker safety and health factors into consideration. Put another way, the safety and health of CWA members should take precedence over the productivity concerns of represented employers.

Represented telecommunications employers should provide CWA telecommunications technicians/craft workers with comprehensive education and training allowing them to develop a high degree of knowledge and a thorough understanding of how to perform assigned tasks in an efficient and productive, yet safe and healthful manner. Such training should be interactive and conducted in a classroom setting (Computer-based training might be used as a supplement, but not as a replacement for interactive classroom training). Ideally, education and training materials should be developed and presented jointly by company and Union safety and health representatives.

Education and training materials and instruction should be provided to employees upon initial assignment to their jobs (or on a mutually agreeable future date). In addition, refresher education and training materials/programs should be developed and provided to employees annually and/or whenever work tasks/jobs have been significantly changed. Further, these education and training materials/sessions should be supplemented with updates provided during tailgate sessions.

The employer's provision of appropriate and ergonomically designed hand tools, electric powered and non-powered equipment as well as required personal protective equipment is essential to the safe and healthful completion of work tasks. Working with well-designed equipment is especially important when performing aerial jobs. Failure to provide well-designed tools and equipment will result in an increased rate of member accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities. For example, in cases where telecommunications craft workers/members are required to use poorly designed hand tools and equipment to perform their work, the Union has identified alarmingly high rates of member repetitive motion injuries and illnesses. These injuries and illnesses make it more difficult for affected members to perform their assigned tasks and increase the likelihood of suffering exposure to/harm from workplace electrical hazards.

During the last several years, CWA has witnessed a significant increase in the number of telecommunications craft members who have experienced accidents, injuries, illnesses, and death as a result of exposure to/contact with electrical power. These occurrences are particularly alarming because for years represented telecommunications employers ensured that their employees were provided safe working conditions. However, over the last several years as telecommunications employers have placed more and more emphasis upon increased productivity at the expense of workplace and worker safety and health

protections, CWA has witnessed a significant increase in electrical power-related accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities.

To better determine the incidence and causes of member health problems, during the early part of 2006 the Union's Occupational Safety and Health Department developed and distributed the CWA survey "Electrical Hazards, Accidents, Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities" to all telecommunications locals. In responding to the survey, several locals indicated during the last three years their members had been exposed to numerous job-related electrical hazards and, in turn, suffered accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities. In addition, the Department has collected information regarding more recent incidents. Following are highlights of the survey findings and additional accident, injury, illness, and fatality information:

Regarding member injuries and illnesses:

- **Sharron St. John, former President; Bob Olson, former chief steward; and Christine McCormack, former steward, CWA Local 4630**, Madison, Wisconsin, reported a member and AT&T (formerly SBC) employee sustained severe electrical burns and injuries while working on a buried telecommunications line. As he was digging into the area where the telecommunications line was located, the shovel came into contact with an unmarked underground electrical power line causing him to be thrown some 20 feet into the air. Fortunately, the member did not suffer any serious health problems (2005).
The local also reported a "near miss" event when a member mistakenly lifted an energized electric power line while performing tree trimming work. Fortunately, the affected member only suffered a minor electrical shock (2005).
- **Jimmy Frederickson, former President, CWA Local 9419**, Redding, California, reported a "near miss" incident in which a member and AT&T (formerly SBC) employee was working from an aerial platform to correct a telecommunications trouble when he noticed (i.e., heard and saw) the bridal wire was arcing. Thus, he descended from the work area and performed a visual inspection of the electrical lead. He found that one leg of the primary electric power line had come off of the electrical insulator and was resting against the metal pin holding the other insulator. In turn, he contacted the Pacific Gas and Electric Company to correct the problem and notified AT&T of this workplace hazard (July 2005).
- **Rick DeLao, former President, CWA Local 9431**, Auburn, California, reported that a member employed by AT&T (formerly SBC) had suffered a "near miss" incident when he was attempting to repair a telecommunications cable. Using an aerial lift to approach the work area, he turned his head to identify any obstructions when his forehead came into contact with the 12 Kilovolt electric power line. The power line had been incorrectly placed at nearly the same pole height as the telecommunications line. As he felt the electric power hit, he was able to lower the platform and call for help. In turn, he was taken to a nearby hospital for treatment and observation. Fortunately, he suffered no ill effects from his exposure to the electric energy (August 2005).

- **Stacie Adams, former President, and Travis Carpenter, former Vice President, CWA Local 2222**, Annandale, Virginia, reported a member and Verizon employee had suffered severe burns to a majority of his body while performing his telecommunications work. The telecommunications line had come into contact with an electric power line creating an electrical fire and causing the member to nearly be thrown out of the aerial bucket. Also, another member who was assisting him was thrown several feet by the electrical blast and suffered hearing trauma (July 2006).
- **Ron Gaskins, former President, CWA Local 2004**, Morganton, West Virginia, reported that two members (one from his local and another from CWA Local 2011) employed as cable splicers by Verizon were involved in a “near miss” electrical hazard incident. While placing and splicing a telecommunications line between two aerial work locations, the telecommunications cable strand and electric power line pulled loose and fell to the ground. Fortunately, as neither of the workers had come into contact with the energized power line, they did not experience any health problems. This incident was caused because the contractor had installed an incorrectly sized strand wrap (October 2006).

During the Union’s investigation, many additional “near miss” incidents were identified. However, as reported by Local Union leaders and occupational safety and health activists, the cases provided to the Safety and Health Department were not indicative of the total number of “near miss” incidents. Rather, they indicated many more “near miss” cases occur that they don’t hear about until some time after the event. The reason for this is simple- affected members are afraid of reporting their case for fear of retaliation from the employer. Of concern, in these instances, the hazardous working condition(s) is/are not abated. Thus, the next technician who performs work at this work location will most likely be exposed to the same electrical hazards.

Regarding member fatalities:

- **Ron Gaskins, former President, CWA Local 2004**, Morganton, West Virginia, reported an incident in which a member of nearby **CWA Local 2006** and Verizon employee was electrocuted while completing his central office work. While connecting a telecommunications pair (of lines) he was hit by an unexpected electric shock. He called out to another nearby technician for help. Unfortunately, the member died en-route to the hospital. The technician’s death was the result of electric power draining through the electric service ground connection and bleeding back into the telecommunications line (1999).
- **Michael Garry, former President, CWA Local 1126**, New York Mills, New York, reported a member employed by Verizon as a telephone lineman was electrocuted when the telecommunications line he was raising/tensioning came into contact with a sagging electrical power line (March 2002).
- **Kingsley Chew, former President, and Dave Hurlburt, former Occupational Safety and Health Chair, CWA Local 9410**, San Francisco, California, reported a member and employee of AT&T (formerly SBC) had been electrocuted while working to repair a telecommunications line. While working in snowy weather

conditions, he correctly placed, reinforced, and climbed the ladder (positioned on the utility pole). While performing his work, the 12 kilovolt electric power line came loose from the pole and fell on the member electrocuting him (December 2004).

- **Louie Rocha**, former **President, CWA Local 9423**, San Jose, California, reported a member and employee of AT&T (formerly SBC) had been electrocuted while performing aerial work on a joint telecommunications/electric utility pole. When he attempted to remove the cover sheath to expose the strand member, he received a severe and fatal electrical shock. There was an unsuccessful attempt to provide cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Unfortunately, telecommunications crews had/have not been trained in CPR for several years (August 2005).
- **Ed Lowdenslager**, former **President, CWA Local 4377**, La Porte, Indiana, reported a member and Verizon employee was electrocuted when working to correct telecommunications service problems in a company-owned central office. While performing his work on a frame ladder, he grasped and pulled the rope (made of wire) to release the ladder. Unknown to our member, the plastic covering on the rope had become damaged with several cracks. Unfortunately, the frame and, thus, the rope had become electrically energized. When the member pulled on the rope, he was electrocuted (June 2006).
- Most recently, **Steve Holland**, former **President**, and **Mark Balsamo**, former **Vice President, CWA Local 2100**, reported a member and lineman employed by Verizon was electrocuted while installing fiber optic cable. While performing aerial work, this tragedy occurred when he came in contact with a power line on a joint utility pole (October 2006).

What Can CWA Leaders and Occupational Safety and Health Activists Do To Prevent Member Near Misses, Accidents, Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities Caused by Exposure to/Contact With Electrical Hazards?

Let's first look at the reasons for the significant increase in "near miss" incidents, accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities among telecommunications technicians. According to CWA's occupational safety and health leaders and activists, two major reasons for affected technicians experiencing safety and health problems are the result of telecommunications employers instituting increased workload/productivity requirements and decreasing the amount of workplace safety and health education and training provided to technicians (and supervisors).

Regarding increased workload/productivity requirements, telecommunications employers have increased the number of assignments/tasks that technicians must complete during their work shift. Given that affected technicians do not know the nature of the assigned work/are not able to determine what needs to be accomplished until they actually arrive at the work location, the increased workload places pressure on them to "cut corners" so that the work can be completed quickly (often, too quickly). Unfortunately, working continuously at an increased pace day-in and day-out has led to an increased number of worker "near miss" incidents, accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities. Further, given

the requirements for increased overtime work, the likelihood of work-related “near miss” incidents, accidents, injuries, illnesses, and fatalities are magnified.

The development and conducting of comprehensive education and training materials and multi-day training sessions regarding working with/within close proximity to electrical power is necessary to increase worker awareness and knowledge. In turn, such increased awareness and knowledge among affected outside plant technicians would reduce the possibility of the work being performed in an unsafe and unhealthful manner. In addition, the provision of regular refresher/update educational sessions is of significant importance. One traditional method of providing workplace safety and health updates/information to affected technicians is through the use of “tail-gate” meetings. Led by the company supervisor and/or technicians, these meetings, conducted when the job is assigned at the reporting garage/work location, focus upon safety and health issues and subjects specific to the assigned work, e.g., aerial, manhole/confined space, commercial, residential, and/or central office. Issues that should be raised include work with/within close proximity to power lines/electrical hazards and methods to ensure that involved workers are not exposed to electrical hazards. Such discussions should include:

- **Inspection of the work area (before work is performed) for potential safety and health hazards;**
- **Provision of engineering controls, e.g., shielding devices and specialized equipment;**
- **Provision of ergonomic hand tools and related work equipment;**
- **Provision of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment, e.g., insulated gloves and blankets, goggles, shoes/footwear, and clothing.**

Unfortunately, many telecommunications companies have cut back on the frequency, number, and/or have practically eliminated “tail gate” meetings. Clearly, “tail gate” meetings need to be conducted routinely and included in the employer’s regular education and training efforts.

Rather than conduct person to person education and training efforts, most represented employers have instituted computer-based training and education. Such training is conducted with no interaction or opportunity for the affected worker(s) to ask questions or provide opinions; rather the employee merely views the computer program and provides her/his response by entering the correct information via the computer. Also, according to many Union leaders, supervisors often encourage the affected worker(s) to indicate/check off completion of the training program without actually taking the entire training. In turn, the worker is told to complete the assigned field work, thus, fulfilling the company’s productivity demands.

Another very important concern deals with the qualifications of managers. More and more, telecommunications employers are hiring supervisors who do not have the proper training and/or work experience. Needless to say, without these important skills, supervisors will not be as likely to conduct education and training as well as ensure the assigned work is performed in a safe and healthful manner.

In instances where the represented telecommunications employer(s) do not provide safe and healthful working conditions (including required safety and health education and training), affected CWA members should:

- Report this issue to her/his Local union president as well as to the company supervisor. In turn, the Local president should report this matter to the District/Bargaining Unit CWA Staff Representative who has workplace safety and health responsibilities. Ideally, the staff representative and the Local president can work with the employer representative(s) to identify and resolve the safety and health issue(s). In addition, the involved CWA Staff Representative should provide this information to CWA's Occupational Safety and Health Department. In turn, the Department may be able to assist in the resolution of the identified safety and health concerns.
- If this matter cannot be resolved, in coordination with the CWA Staff Representative, the Local union should consider filing a grievance. Details gathered during the union's investigation of the incident(s)/working condition(s) should be used as the basis for the grievance. Remember, grievances must be well documented, filed, and handled in a timely manner.
- If the local president and staff representative do not believe this matter will be resolved through the grievance process and there is a potential violation of an OSHA standard or, lacking an OSHA standard, the assigned work is not "free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees," in coordination with the CWA Staff Representative, the local should discuss the issue(s) with an OSHA representative and, if necessary, file an OSHA complaint. (See Chapter IX, "Resources," CWA Occupational Safety and Health Manual for the address and contact information of the federal and/or state occupational safety and health agency within your geographic area).

What Can You Do?

All CWA members should make sure their employer is maintaining a safe and healthful workplace. The key to making the workplace safe for all CWA members is strong, active local safety and health committees. The committee can identify dangerous conditions at the workplace and discuss them with management. If the employer refuses to resolve the safety and health hazard(s), the committee can request an OSHA inspection. The committee should always coordinate its activities through the local officers, the CWA Representatives, and negotiated safety and health committees. Local union members are encouraged to participate in their local union's occupational safety and health committee.

Also, CWA local union leaders and occupational safety and health activists are encouraged to contact the:

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Developed in 2007 and revised in 2009, 2013, and 2017.