

Protecting Lone Workers in the Age of COVID 19 and Beyond

In the wake of COVID-19 concern for the safety and health of our population, both in the workplace and at home, drives enforcement of stringent shelter-in-place and social distancing guidelines. During this time, we rely heavily on lone workers every day to provide essential services. Lone workers are an integral part of the global workforce and include jobs such as truck drivers, park rangers, mail carriers, home health care workers, tradespeople, utility workers, and security guards. A lone worker is by strict definition, any employee working in a remote or isolated setting, outside of the view of employers or co-workers and without direct supervision. While today, with mandated shelter-in-place and social distancing policies in effect nationwide, many people now working from home might be considered “lone workers”, here we are focused on the essential lone worker who is not sequestered at home. With isolation orders in place, office and building closures hinder employees from physically checking in with their employers and co-workers at a central location, and it is now more vital than ever to remain connected to lone workers and ensure their safety.



Lone workers face the same risks that may be present on any jobsite, however they are further vulnerable to additional risk factors that come with not being easily seen or heard by their co-workers, supervisors or employers in the event of an emergency. Whether it is an accidental fall, heart attack, workplace violence or a weather emergency, lone workers may have no way to call for medical or physical assistance, and absent a comprehensive policy tailored to meet the specific health and safety needs of lone workers, it is difficult, if not impossible for employers to take prompt and appropriate action to mitigate unexpected hazards faced by these employees.

As with any other employees, OSHA deems employers responsible for the health and safety of all their workers including their lone workers and requires a system in place to provide safeguards. Per OSHA 1915.84(a)(1) and (2), a lone worker safety policy must include checking in with lone workers, “Throughout each work shift at regular intervals appropriate to the job assignment”, and at the end of a job assignment or work shift, “whichever comes first”. Further, OSHA 1915.84(b) specifies that check-ins performed by employers must be either verbal or by sight.

An effective policy for lone workers safety should include a few key elements:

1. Risk Assessment of Job Site: A thorough risk assessment of a job site should be conducted prior to the start of any job to determine whether it is possible for a lone workers to work safely.
2. A Central Calendar: All lone worker jobs and assignments scheduled should be calendared in a central location that can be accessed (online if possible) by all other departmental workers and supervisors. Calendar information should include employee name, job site addresses, and estimated duration of visit on site.
3. Understanding of Potential Hazards: Prior to going to any jobsite, employers should identify and discuss all potential hazards of the particular job with the lone worker to ensure hazards are

understood. Whether the jobsite is a high traffic area, a confined space, or a customer's personal residence, there are potential hazards unique to each site and these should be clearly established prior to the start of any job.

4. Use of Correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): As a result of COVID-19, the term "PPE" is now familiar to most all of us. Employers are responsible for determining the necessary PPE for a job and making sure employees have access to it. PPE can include anything from respirators to steel-toed shoes. During the ongoing concerns related to the transmissibility of COVID-19, a PPE discussion should also include reminders about social distancing, hand-washing, and wearing of face covering if applicable. As some PPE, such as certain types of masks, have become inaccessible alternative options should be vetted for efficacy.
5. A Check-in System: While on the jobsite, employers and employees should have a check-in system in place to ensure employees have arrived at and left a jobsite safely. A check in system may include things such as a predetermined system of phone calls/text messages, two-way radio communication, or smart phone apps.
6. An Emergency Action Plan: Before lone workers go to a job site, an emergency action plan should be in place and should include the method by which a lone worker will notify the employer of an emergency, whether it is a wearable panic button device, a smart phone alarm, use of a code word, etc. Further an emergency action plan should clearly address any circumstances that will prompt the employer to contact emergency services.
7. Designated Administrator and Backup Administrator: An effective lone worker safety plan will include a designated person(s) to oversee the program and ensure that it is both effective and enforced. A company can have the most effective plan possible in place, but if employees are not using it, it will not matter.

COVID-19 has changed the way we work and live in many ways, one way being that more and more people are working remotely from home offices and could fall under a definition of a "lone worker". Employees should check with employers on lone worker policies, as such policies are often defined differently for employees who occasionally or by agreement work remotely. During this challenging working world, whether an employee is an essential lone worker or temporarily working remotely, checking in on a regular basis with employees working outside the typical office, station, or location, should always be a priority for employers.

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