

McAuliffe pushes workplace safety after surge in fatalities this year



Gov. Terry McAuliffe stopped by the Virginia Occupational Safety and Health Conference on Friday in Hampton.



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One workplace fatality is too many, and 36 so far this year is totally unacceptable, Gov. **Terry McAuliffe** said during the last day of the 21st annual Virginia Occupational Safety and Health Conference on Friday.

"There's nothing more important for me than to make sure all the folks in the commonwealth are protected," said McAuliffe, who is the first sitting governor to attend the conference.

Workplace-related deaths this year have already surpassed the 31 fatalities experienced in both 2014 and 2015, Virginia Department of Labor and Industry Commissioner C. Ray Davenport said during a training seminar Friday. If the pace keeps up, that means the state could see another eight to 10 workplace deaths before the end of the year, he said.

Tuesday, two workers died after getting trapped in a pipe at the Suffolk landfill, Davenport said. The three-day conference started the next day at the Hampton Roads Convention Center. The state also is investigating four deaths in one year at the Goodyear tire plant in Danville.

Davenport said his department couldn't identify any trends as to why there has been a surge in workplace fatalities, but he wants both employers and employees to make sure they're doing everything they can, including more training, to prevent injury or death.

The department issued public service announcements in August out of concern. Most of the workplace deaths have been in construction or general industry, he said.

"Know your standards. Pay attention," Davenport said. "Don't take shortcuts. If something doesn't look right, ask yourself, 'Is this safe?'"

Davenport implored workers to use required safety equipment or gear and asked contractors to make sure they're hiring reputable sub-contractors.

Davenport pointed to a case in which an excavator — heavy construction equipment with a bucket — tipped over. The operator wasn't wearing his seat belt, fell out and was crushed by the equipment. Last fall in Northern Virginia, a construction worker's death could have been prevented had he anchored his fall-prevention lanyard or cable rather than slinging it over his shoulder, Davenport said.

Electricity can also be a killer on the job site, as was seen in death of an employee doing work on the installation of Tesla's electric car-charging station at the Janaf Shopping Yard in Norfolk in August 2015, he said.

The victim was sealing conduit openings on an energized circuit, made contact with a charged component and was electrocuted, he said. That equipment should have been de-energized, Davenport said, adding the citations reflected that employees should have been warned and workers should have been wearing electrically insulating gear.

"You don't want any of your employees or any of your (subcontractors) to end up like this," he said.

And the workers getting injured aren't necessarily inexperienced, Davenport said, noting 19 of this year's fatalities were people age 40 or older.

McAuliffe noted the importance of the Virginia Occupational Safety and Health program, which conducted more than 2,700 inspections in fiscal year 2015 and was directly responsible for correcting nearly 19,300 incidences of workplace hazards in Virginia.

Employers can improve productivity and costs by being proactive about workplace safety, McAuliffe said. In June last year, McAuliffe signed the Virginia Voluntary Protection Programs Act to encourage companies to take safety above and beyond the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's requirements through

cooperative relationships. Virginia was the first state to sign the voluntary compliance bill, according to the Voluntary Protection Programs Participants Association Inc.

Virginia's Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program provides incentives to smaller, high-hazard employers to involve their employees in establishing safety program, according to the state website.

Virginia now has 44 work sites involved in the Voluntary Protection Program and 19 work sites involved in SHARP, McAuliffe said.

While McAuliffe has focused on growing jobs and the workforce in the state, he said Virginia must make sure it has the safest U.S. workforce as well.

"When we have the safest workforce, there's not a company in the globe we cannot recruit to the greatest state in the greatest nation on earth," McAuliffe said.

The Virginia Occupational Safety and Health program offers free on-site consultation services to help small businesses voluntarily comply with VOSH standards. For more information, call the Department of Labor's regional office at 757-455-0891.

Bozick can be reached by phone at 757-247-4741. Sign up for a free weekday business news email at TidewaterBiz.com.

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