

Telling Worker Stories: Preventing Wood Chipper Fatalities



The Challenge

Since 1992, the California Department of Public Health's Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) program has investigated ten tree worker fatalities, five involving a wood-chipping machine. FACE staff wanted a new format for reaching tree care employers and workers with useful prevention recommendations.

The Response

FACE developed a digital story using photos, worker accounts, and investigation findings to tell the tragic story of Antonio Barajas, a 32-year-old husband and father of a four-month-old son who worked for a professional tree trimming company. One day, he and two other employees were gathering brush to feed into a wood chipper. Antonio dragged a branch to the machine that was caught in a tree trimmer's climbing rope. The rope went through the wood chipper's blades and snapped tight, throwing Antonio against the machine. Antonio's neck broke, and his life was gone in an instant.

Antonio's co-workers agreed to re-enact the incident for the digital story, in order to prevent similar incidents from occurring. The story includes recommendations for placing debris in piles and checking for unwanted objects before feeding them into a wood chipper. It also recommends having a co-worker near the wood chipper safety control bar to reverse or shut down the machine in an emergency. FACE put the digital story on its website and YouTube; publicized it in an electronic newsletter, through tweets and Facebook posts; and promoted it by partnering with the nation's largest tree care trade group to employers, workers, and chipper manufacturers.

The Impact

FACE sent the digital story recommendations along with other investigation materials to Cal/OSHA in support of increased tree worker protections. Cal/OSHA revised its tree care regulations noting that changes were made based on the FACE program's recommendations.

"We think these stories are going to resonate with viewers and prevent future deaths."
-Laura Styles, FACE program

The digital story reached large numbers of tree work professionals through the tree care industry association. This association integrated the digital story, along with FACE fact sheets and investigation reports, into its educational curriculum. FACE disseminated the digital story through other federal and state agencies. It has been shown at numerous public health and trade conferences. It has also become a leading example of how "new" and "social" media can be used to engage workers on health and safety topics.

For more information, visit the California FACE Program at:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohb-face>

Digital story (YouTube): <http://youtu.be/7NKZM9I1SEk>

Digital story topic page: <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohb-face/Pages/stories.aspx>