OSHA: Safety Failures Led to Deaths of Three Workers Who Entered a Manhole

On Jan. 16, Elway Gray, a 34-year-old pipe layer, entered a manhole in South Florida — a confined space — and quickly became unresponsive. Louis O’Keefe, a 49-year-old laborer, entered the manhole and attempted to rescue Gray. After O’Keefe also became unresponsive, Robert Wilson, a 24-year-old equipment operator, followed to help his fallen coworkers. All three men died.

Post-incident atmospheric testing in the manhole revealed lethal levels of hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide. Two other employees and a volunteer firefighter also were exposed to the toxic gases in the manhole during rescue attempts but survived.

“The hazards of working in manholes are well established, but there are ways to make it safe,” said Condell Eastmond, the OSHA area director in Fort Lauderdale. “Three employees needlessly lost their lives and others were injured due to their employer’s failure to follow safe work practices.”

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