

## High Level of Construction Fatalities Continue in North Carolina

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Construction sites are part of everyday life around East Carolina University's campus, driving down the street and sometimes right in our backyard. But what most people do not realize is the danger these workers go through in order for the project to get built.

Construction accounts for about 40 percent of the employee fatalities in North Carolina, even though construction makes up just 6 percent of the state's workforce, according to Tom Hayes, eastern chief of the North Carolina Compliance Bureau.

Hayes attributes the high number of fatalities to inexperience on the job.

"The folks that are going to get hurt are the ones that have been on the job less than three months," says Hayes.

While there has been an increase in the number of construction workers going to college and getting a degree, it is not mandatory in North Carolina or the United States to have a degree in construction before entering the field. This makes it more dangerous, not only for that particular person but for the rest of the workers on the job site.

"There are a lot of young people going into the field. I even have a 24-year-old son who is in construction. They are inexperienced and count for a lot of the accidents on the job," Hayes says.

According to North Carolina Department of Labor, Research and Policy Division Manager Eddie Cotten, North Carolina lost 30 construction workers in 2006, which was down from 37 deaths in 2005. Altogether from 2003 to 2006 North Carolina had 163 construction fatalities. Of those, the majority resulted from falling. The U.S. as a whole saw a 6 percent increase, from 1,184 in 2005 to 1,258 in 2006, in construction fatalities.

Keeping these accidents from happening is a full time job. In North Carolina five separate compliance boards do routine inspections on construction sites to make sure they are safe. These inspections are done either randomly or in response to personal complaints.

With 45 counties in the state's eastern region, Hayes states that "altogether we probably end up with 300 complaints a year on average. Of those complaints 25-30 percent are construction related."

When a complaint is called in, the board sends an inspector to the site to inspect it. However, according to Hayes, this is not how most construction sites are inspected.

“Complaints don’t make up but maybe 10 to 15 percent of our inspections,” Hayes stated.

Most are inspected through random drive-bys.

“We do a lot of referral inspections, like if we were riding down the road and we look up and they got a building going up and we see serious hazards like guys on the roof that don’t have any fall protection or guys on scaffolds that don’t have the proper guard rails all we have to do is pull in and do an inspection. That is a majority of our inspections,” says Hayes.

Compliance board inspectors take their jobs seriously. In order to be considered for the job applicants need at least three years experience or a degree in safety and health. After they are hired they then go through a nine month training class until they are ready to begin inspections.

According to Cotton, about 400,000 construction workers are on the job in North Carolina at any given time, and keeping these workers safe is North Carolina’s top priority.

If a site is inspected and then deemed to be hazardous the inspector does not have the right to shut it down immediately. He has to talk to the site manager and get him to fix the problem or voluntarily shut it down. Compliance board officers cannot shut down a site unless it is extremely hazardous, meaning that within the next few minutes someone is likely to be injured or killed.

In 1998 North Carolina implemented a program in which counties with a high number of construction fatalities were deemed “emphasis counties.” The compliance board keeps a watch out for these counties at all times. Counties that have been a constant on this list are Mecklenburg, Wake and Forsyth. According to Hayes, these larger metropolitan counties have been on the list since the plan was started and will probably continue to be.

Along with this list North Carolina has also started to target counties that have a high number of building contracts within a year. This, according to Hayes, was put into place so North Carolina could “be proactive, not reactive.”

Dustin Oakley has been a construction worker since he was 16 and he understands Hayes’ point of view of being proactive on the work site.

“When there are 15 to 20 guys, or even more, on a site everyone’s safety is a risk. You constantly have to look to see where other people are in relation to you to make sure nothing goes wrong. Sometimes inspectors can be a bother because when they show up they slow things down but for the most part they are just trying to keep myself and my fellow workers safe,” Oakley states.

North Carolina's plan seems to be working. The construction fatality rate is down, and more and more workers are opting for college first before entering directly into the construction field.

Gus Brown is a construction management student at ECU. He had the chance to jump directly into the workforce but chose college instead.

"I could have gone straight in with the family business but the training wouldn't have been as good. Plus, if I decide to try to work for another construction agency besides my family's I will come in with a degree, which means I will end up making more money," Brown says.

In the construction field several specific types of workers are at the highest risk of fatalities. Those include electricians, roofers, painters and drywall and ceiling installers. The lowest risk is for carpenters, construction trade helpers, plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters.

*Greg Katski and Terence Campbell contributed to this story.*