

So you've provided your workers with the latest and best Personal Fall Arrest System (PFAS) - body harness, lanyard with a decelerating device, 5000 lb. tie point. Is that enough? Ever thought about what happens when someone falls and ends up suspended 80 feet above grade?

Whether it's framers working at a perimeter edge, carpenters constructing a concrete deck form – leading edge work, roofers, painters, or anyone working where PFAS is required if a worker undergoes a fall arrest caught after a fall, OSHA regulations call for "prompt" rescue. What does that mean? How do you achieve it?

Most people don't consider the need for rescue because they intuitively believe fall-arrest equipment implies rescue. While fall arrest is the first part of a rescue, the save is not complete until the worker is safely retrieved. A recommended recovery time goal is "prompt" rescue within 6 minutes.

Pre-planning can prevent a disaster. While planning work activity at heights, perform a "what if" analysis. Imagine worst case scenarios on the job and what could happen if a fall occurred. Are there obstacles in the fall zone that could injure the falling worker? Is there a potential swing load effect that could cause the worker to pendulum sideways into an obstacle?

Can an integral rescue device be used with the fall protection system? If not, how are you going to affect a rescue? After computing the fall distance, is there a safe, quick means for retrieving the worker, such as a ladder or a man-lift that can quickly be moved under the worker? If your rescue attempt fails, do you have a backup plan, such as calling an outside rescue service to respond to your site? And if so, how do you plan to stabilize or support the worker while waiting for the service to respond?

The right training

One element for providing prompt rescue is training. Workers should be trained in specific work-at-height activities and for specific fall hazards they might encounter. This training should be hands-on and include inspection and donning the harness properly, checking anchorage attachments, and being suspended a couple of feet off the ground for at least five minutes so that they and their fellow trainees recognize the need for prompt response.

Then check for adequate clearance should they fall. You need anywhere from eight to 22 feet to avoid contact injuries, depending on the equipment you provide. Your qualified person certifies that proper anchorages are available.

Rescue options

Assuming the worker is not injured and able to move self-rescue is always the best; it's the basic response level. A fallen worker is able to move to safety under his own power. This can occur by the worker swinging himself over to a platform or structure that allows him to climb up to safety. The worker should NOT disengage himself from fall protection until he is safely on firm ground or structure. Can you plan to make this form of rescue possible? If not, decide if you can plan for an assisted self rescue, whereby a co-worker or co-workers help the fallen worker to self-rescue. Maybe they provide a stepladder, rope or wire ladder, or maybe someone drives a scissor or aerial lift to the fall site. Be sure that the equipment used is designated "rescue equipment."

Don't make the mistake of hoping a lift will be available. Ensure it is by having it on-site with a designated operator who knows how to move it in for rescue from a fall arrest. There are special considerations for this level of rescue. You'll need to check that the workplace area and height directly below the potential fall area permits the use of lifts. And, of course, you need time to order and receive this equipment before work-at-height begins.

Advanced response

Then there's a more advanced response level. In this case a co-worker activates in-place raising or lowering equipment, or a rescue team gets to the fallen worker for rescue. Here's where advanced training is required. Whether you have

an on-site team or one called from off-site, be sure they're fully trained and familiar with the potential fall site. That means they should have been on-site to train and may mean they are trained in rope and high angle rescue techniques.

These teams should practice rescue skills at least quarterly and be able to respond to a fall quickly. This could even mean that rescuers are present during the activity with their anchorages and equipment pre-rigged before anyone starts work-at-height.

Bottom line: recognize that two rescues must occur in a fall protection program. Plan for **arresting the fall**, and plan for the second save, **rescue**.