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Fire Watch General Safety

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported that in a four-year span, US fire departments responded to an average of 4,600 structure fires involving hot work activities each year.

Fortunately, there are many safeguards that can assist in preventing these incidents. Utilizing fire watch personnel during hot work activities is one effective safeguard in preventing fires.

What is a Fire Watch?

Fire watch personnel are responsible for keeping flammable materials away from ignition sources and watching for sparks, embers, or other possible ignition sources that could start a fire.

If a fire occurs, the fire watch will attempt to extinguish it or will sound a fire alarm. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and NFPA require fire watchers in various situations. Your employer will determine when fire watch personnel is required.

General Fire Watch Requirements:

- Fire watchers are required to have fire extinguishing equipment readily available and be trained in its use. They should try to extinguish fires when within the capacity of the equipment available. Otherwise, they should sound the alarm.
- Fire watchers are required to be familiar with facilities for sounding an alarm in the event of a fire.
- Fire watchers should refrain from all other job duties.
- According to the NFPA 51B Standard, fire watchers must remain on the scene for 60 minutes after work is complete. The fire watch may need to stay on-site longer, depending on the conditions of the worksite.

Fire Watch Best Practices:

- Always read, understand, and maintain the conditions stated on the hot work permit.
- Inspect the work area before and after each shift for the potential release of flammable liquids or vapors.
- Keep flammable materials away from ignition sources.
- Maintain communication with workers in the area.
- Stop operations immediately if you identify a hazard.
- Know the wind direction to understand where sparks and open flames will blow.
- Never leave the work area while hot work is going on. If you must go, stop the job, and notify the workers.
- Return all firefighting equipment to their permanent housing following each work shift.

Summary:

Fire watchers have a critical job that can save lives, prevent injuries, and preserve property. For this reason, they need to receive training on various topics, such as the use of fire extinguishers, the hazards with fire watch duties, the use of personal protective equipment, etc.

By staying alert, following assigned job tasks, and keeping flammable materials away from ignition sources, fire watchers help ensure the safety of everyone around them.

If you identify hazards or unsafe acts during hot work activities, you should stop work immediately and notify a supervisor.