Safe Rooftop Snow Removal at Work: Protecting Employees from Winter Hazards

As winter approaches, businesses must address the challenges of snow accumulation on rooftops. Removing snow is crucial to avoid structural damage and ensure safe operations, as it can pose significant risk to workers if a collapse were to occur. However, rooftop work comes with its own inherent dangers. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), falls are the leading cause of fatalities and injuries when removing snow and ice from rooftops.

Rooftop snow removal work can expose personnel to various hazards including:

- Falls from roof edges
- Falls through skylights
- Falls from ladders
- Electrical injuries from contact with overhead wires
- Cold-related issues like frostbite and hypothermia
- Overexertion leading to muscle strains

To prepare for safe snow removal, employers should first assess the roof's structural integrity and load-bearing capacity, and ensure the location of skylights and the roof edge are well marked with flags or by other means. Once that is complete, determine the most effective way to clear snow and ice and apply ice-preventing chemicals, when needed. In most cases, the safest way is from the ground using long-handled tools or draglines. If that is not an option, aerial lifts can generally provide employees safer access to the roof than ladders, especially when there is a significant accumulation of snow on the ground. Ladders should only be used when absolutely necessary. If a ladder is necessary, use it only to access the roof. Never use tools such as a snow rake or shovel while standing on the ladder; doing so may cause the employee to fall.

When working at heights of four feet or more, OSHA requires that employers provide guardrails, safety nets or personal fall arrest systems. If the roof does not have a tall enough parapet wall or standard guardrail in place, then some other form of fall protection must be used. Employers must ensure that employees are trained on the proper use, care and inspection of fall protection equipment including lanyard, harness, self-retracting lifeline, etc. Additional requirements are found in OSHA 1910.28 and 1926 Subpart M.

Electrical hazards are another concern when clearing off rooftop snow. To minimize the risk of electrocution, maintain at least a 10-foot clearance from power lines, use non-conductive tools and ensure that electrical equipment is grounded.

Cold weather exacerbates the dangers of frostbite and hypothermia. Employers can help by providing warm, layered clothing, encouraging frequent breaks in heated areas and ensuring workers stay hydrated with water or electrolyte drinks. Ensure employees are trained on the signs and symptoms of frostbite, hypothermia and other cold-stress conditions that affect the body.

To help prevent muscle strains, review proper lifting techniques and encourage employees to push the snow rather than use a shovel to lift it. Warm-up stretches prior to starting work can also help prevent muscle strains. Also, if employees use a snow thrower, they should be trained on its proper operation, the correct PPE to use and safe ways to raise and lower the snow thrower to and from the roof.

One final concern is for anyone working on the ground near where the roof is being cleared. Falling snow and ice can pose a serious danger to workers and bystanders below. Best practices include establishing an exclusion zone of at least 10 feet from snow removal areas, using signs and barriers to limit access and requiring hard hats and eye protection for those working nearby.

While rooftop snow removal is necessary, it is important to be aware of the hazards. Employers must engage in careful planning, provide proper training and equipment and adhere to OSHA guidelines to ensure worker safety. Additionally, employees must apply what they have learned to prevent injuries to themselves or fellow workers. By taking these precautions, businesses can protect their employees and reduce winter-related workplace injuries.

If you would like to know more about Sedgwick's safety services or would like to schedule a confidential consultation, please contact Andy Sawan at andrew.sawan@sedgwick.com or 330-819-4728.