

Lightning safety



Manuel L. Peralta Jr.

This month's column is inspired by a safety activist who was unable to find any USPS training material on lightning safety at work. In our review of all available materials, the only lightning safety talk published by the USPS is found in Publication 129 (March 1999, pages 277-278) but is titled "Off-the-Job Safety" and in part conveys the following:

...While it may be interesting to watch a thunderstorm from your front door or a window in your home, it is not safe. Stay away from doors, windows, fireplaces, radiators, stoves, metal pipes, sinks, and plug-in electrical appliances such as hair dryers and electric razors.

Remain indoors if possible...If you must be outside and need to find shelter, try to find a building protected by a lightning system. A large, unprotected building offers a degree of safety if you stay away from plumbing, wiring and appliances. Closed automobiles provide a protective non-grounded metal shell for safety. When you can't find one of these shelters, a ravine or valley will offer some protection.

The best thing to do is to avoid lightning storms by staying indoors if possible...

In February, NALC requested a meeting with the USPS to develop lightning safety training materials for you at work. As I prepare this month's column, there were no takers; therefore, NALC offers the following information gathered from federal agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Weather Service (NWS). All of these agencies have put out the same key message, which is: "When thunder roars, go indoors."

It is not a mere coincidence that Publication 129 warns you to stay indoors during a lightning storm—that is, if you are on your own time. NALC believes that this warning should be extended to you by your managers to prevent you from getting in harm's way while out delivering mail.

The Employee and Labor Relations Manual (ELM) at Section 811.1 affirms that USPS is subject to OSHA and its governing rules and regulations.

Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (the "General Duty Clause") requires an employer to fur-

nish to its employees "employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees..."

In a policy letter dated Dec. 18, 2003, OSHA's Directorate of Enforcement wrote:

Employers can be cited for violation of the General Duty Clause if a recognized serious hazard exists in their workplace and the employer does not take reasonable steps to prevent or abate the hazard. The General Duty Clause is used only where there is no standard that applies to the particular hazard. The following elements are necessary to prove a violation of the General Duty Clause:

- a. The employer failed to keep the workplace free of a hazard to which employees of that employer were exposed;
- b. The hazard was recognized;
- c. The hazard was causing or was likely to cause death or serious physical harm; and
- d. There was a feasible and useful method to correct the hazard.

"When thunder roars, go indoors."

The federal agencies referenced above have issued a uniform opinion that lightning is a known hazard likely to cause serious injury or death and have recommended that workers move indoors to get out of harm's way when we hear thunder nearby.

On June 15, 2010, Ferguson, MO, letter carrier Christina Jones, a member of St. Louis Branch 343, found herself caught in the middle of a thunderstorm while delivering her route. She took cover under a tree. Christina passed away from the injuries suffered in a lightning strike. At the time of her death, she left behind her 6-year-old son, Dylon.

It's time that management sent out an educational message to protect you.

Keep an eye on each other.



Above, left: St. Louis Branch 343 member Christina Jones with her son, Dylon. Above, right: A remembrance vigil for Jones at the tree she took cover under during a lightning storm that claimed her life.