

DOI: Flaws in HA's Hoist, But Not Sure Why Worker Died

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, May 11, 2015 5:30 pm

Though there were several problems with a Housing Authority hoist where a paramedic found an employee's body pinned, the Department of Investigation stopped short of blaming the mechanism for the March death of Caretaker Toni Jackson in a report issued May 6.

'Hoist Resting on Head'

HA workers found Ms. Jackson, a single mother of two, dead a half-hour after her March 7 shift at the Coney Island Houses ended. A previous investigation done by her union, Teamsters Local 237, found that she had her head and neck lodged in the lift, though the Chief Medical Examiner said she died of natural causes.

But the DOI report offered more details on the scene to which EMS workers responded. One of the paramedics told investigators that he "realized her head was pinned between two metal bars and that she was bleeding from her mouth area." He added that he initially couldn't move her body "due to the pressure of the hoist resting on her head" and that when he used a switch to lift the mechanism, there was slack on the chain.

Still, the watchdog agency didn't implicate the jury-rigged machine in the 31-year-old's death.

"Because DOI does not have independent forensic pathology expertise, investigators did not find that the deficient condition of the...garbage hoist caused Ms. Jackson's death," the report said.

Noting there were some minor abrasions on her head and neck, the Chief Medical Examiner's autopsy report had attributed her death to "cardiac arrhythmia," or cardiac arrest. Local 237 President Gregory Floyd has called for an independent investigation or autopsy, alleging there was a cover-up of the cause of her death. (HA officials denied the allegations.)

"We're calling more for it now," Mr. Floyd of the DOI report. "You have two conflicting reports from the city. There should be another autopsy done; the District Attorney should get involved in the



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MARK PETERS: 'Stop using obsolete equipment.'

investigation.”

‘A Systemic Safety Threat’

About a dozen HA buildings use the lifts to bring garbage from the lower-level trash rooms to the doors leading outside. In its investigation, the DOI looked at seven of them being used at the Coney Island Houses and the Bay View Houses in Canarsie and found poor training and few safety mechanisms as well as worn cables, missing gates and other examples of disrepair leading to a “systemic threat to the safety of NYCHA employees.” After Ms. Jackson died, the HA took all 66 of its hoists out of service citywide after finding similar conditions in other developments.

The DOI’s report was sent to the HA May 4 and made public two days later. A spokesperson for the authority said the report confirmed the hoist didn’t cause Ms. Jackson’s death and that the HA was correct in assessing the need to upgrade the garbage lifts.

“All hoists continue to remain out of service as we review design, modifications and costs to enhance equipment safety, and [our] Operations department is additionally developing comprehensive training and maintenance procedures for when the equipment is upgraded,” the spokesperson wrote in an e-mail.

Say Machine Acted Up

Ms. Jackson was typically assigned to another building without a hoist. Two other Caretakers who often worked in the room said the machine occasionally spun free of the tracks or that they often used a pole to realign it as the doors “constantly” got stuck on the tracks or the upper-level floor.

The system associated with the fatal incident was built in 1954, pre-dating the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and was originally used to transport ash from basement incinerators, according to the DOI. There were no inspection records related to the hoist and no training regimen guiding its use; but there were no hoist-related injuries reported over the previous five years.

The lift had a damaged cage door that didn’t make contact with a safety switch as designed, duct tape on the chain and bent or misaligned guardrails, the DOI found. Previous work orders included welding to prevent the machine from falling and to correct a failure of the car to slide down because hinges and bolts were incorrectly welded outside the car. Exposed wiring, possibly sparking, was fixed last August.

Telltale Hard Hat

A month after Ms. Jackson’s death, a DOI Deputy Inspector General recovered her hard hat and a left-handed work glove from under a compactor belt, the report stated. Though there weren’t any signs of impact on the helmet, it had several dozen “red-speckled marks” on the inside and outside.

The report recommended that the HA look into creating ramps or garbage compactors to eliminate the need for hoists in the buildings where they’re used. It also said if the HA wishes to bring them

back into service, they should be redesigned to modern safety standards.

“DOI examined this serious issue to see what NYCHA can and should be doing to prevent and remedy unsafe conditions related to garbage hoists,” DOI Commissioner Mark Peters said in a statement. “We support NYCHA’s action to shut down these units and recommend the city permanently halt the use of this obsolete and dangerous equipment, while looking for alternatives.”