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- [Home Page](#)
- [Today's Newspaper](#)
- [Business Monday](#)
- [Sister Islands](#)
- [Supplements](#)
- [Online Classifieds](#)
- [Tourist Today](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Jamaican in Cayman](#)
- [Cayman Islands](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Services](#)
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## Rising injuries in construction



**Steve Hawley, Director of Cayman Contractors Association.**

Monday, July 25, 2005

Even ten months after Hurricane Ivan, the construction industry continues to experience an unprecedented boom, providing opportunities for Caymanians to start up companies and new jobs. But it has become a double-edged sword as the recent deaths of two workers and rising injuries bring to light that construction work is inherently dangerous as families become increasingly concerned about whether a husband, father, son, or brother should be risking death or injury.

In response, the Department of Employment Relations has taken the lead in initiating national safety standards and training and hiring more inspection personnel, applauded by many in the industry. Still some industry experts are saying the problem goes beyond initiating safety standards, because most of the injuries have been occurring among new and inexperienced construction companies, and there are just too many construction sites and workers to adequately enforce safety standards.

“As long as unqualified people are allowed to practice, we will have these dangers,” said Steve Hawley, Director of the Cayman Contractors Association and General Manager for Phoenix Construction. “As an example, there was a recent death in downtown George Town. On this site, an extension ladder was placed against a two-story building, over a pickup truck, with the feet of the ladder in the middle of the roadway of a downtown street. The ladder was at an extremely low angle and would have been at great risk, even if it were not in a spot where it would be likely that a vehicle would drive into it. While such a condition would never occur with a responsible



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contractor, it is sadly true that, if every contractor, no matter how inexperienced, is allowed to do second-story work, no Safety Policy, no matter how stringent, can prevent any single worker from performing such an unsafe act. This does not, however, negate the need for sensible guidelines.”

Mr Hawley explained that there is only so much enforcement the Department of Employment Relations can do.

“As it is, they must now enforce the Labour Law and Pensions Law and they are terribly understaffed now. We know that those laws cannot be enforced properly, in spite of all the efforts the Department of Employment Relations is making. We can’t expect them to take on a new responsibility, one which is infinitely harder to enforce, and to have a complete success of it.

“Remember, there are now over 760 licensed contractors now and many more who are not licensed. At any given time, it is likely that there are over 500 projects underway. How can a handful of officers adequately enforce safety on all these sites? As soon as the inspector walks away from a job, an irresponsible contractor can once again behave irresponsibly with impunity. It’s important that we don’t expect the Department of Employment Relations to eliminate job-related injuries. That’s asking them to do the impossible. What they are hoping to do is improve general conditions, which is a realistic and praiseworthy goal.”

Mr Hawley explained that it will be costly to implement safety standards.

“We should be asking ourselves, ‘Is it worth the cost?’ In a recent meeting with contractors, Mr. Walling Whittaker, Director of the Department of Employment Relations asked, ‘What is the value of a human life?’ This is a vital point.

“We can either be dishonest with ourselves and pretend that the cost of this policy will be negligible, or we can throw out the proposal because we’re admitting that it will be costly, or we can begin from day one saying yes, the cost will be significant. It will unquestionably raise the cost of construction in Cayman, but it is high time we placed a higher value on the lives of our workers and the cost increase is one we should be prepared to shoulder.”

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