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  - Speaker: Dr. David Michaels
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**Remarks Prepared for Delivery by  
David Michaels, PhD, MPH  
Assistant Secretary of Labor  
for Occupational Safety and Health  
DOL-FCC Workshop on Tower Climber Safety and Injury Prevention  
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[\[View recording of workshop.\]](#)

It is my pleasure to be here for today's workshop, which represents a historic collaboration between government agencies and all sectors of the wireless industry to discuss tower worker safety. We are here today because we know how dangerous working with communication towers can be and because we all have a role in keeping workers safe.

I want to thank FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler and his staff and Secretary of Labor Tom Perez for their commitment to worker safety. Because of their leadership, some of the industry's biggest players are at the table together for the first time to discuss how we can work together to prevent worker injuries and fatalities.

We at OSHA are very concerned about the rising number of tower worker deaths. The fatality rate in this industry is extraordinarily high - tower workers are killed on the job at a rate more than ten times higher than construction workers.

In 2013, OSHA recorded 13 communication tower-related worker deaths, which is nearly double the number of the previous two years combined. And so far in 2014, there have already been 11 worker deaths at communication tower worksites. On January 31, Ronaldo Eduard Smith, a maintenance worker, fell to his death from a communications tower in Cameron County, Texas. The very next day two cell towers collapsed at a job site in Clarksburg, West Virginia, killing two tower workers, Kyle Kirkpatrick and Terry Lee Richard, as well as firefighter Michael Dale Garrett, who responded to the collapse.

In March two tower workers, Seth Garner and Martin Powers, died in Blaine, Kansas when a cell tower they were dismantling collapsed.

These are just a few of the tragedies that have occurred this year --- but every single one of them could have been prevented. The deaths of these workers cannot be the price we pay for increased wireless communication.

OSHA has been focused on improving safety in this industry for the last year. We have developed a comprehensive initiative, including outreach to key industry stakeholders, public and media outreach, training, as well as possible rulemaking.

We are developing a Request for Information to engage all stakeholders, including everyone here today, in a collaborative effort to prevent more of these senseless tragedies. In addition, you can share your stories, concerns, and best practices at [OSHACommTower@dol.gov](mailto:OSHACommTower@dol.gov).

Where necessary, OSHA also uses tough enforcement and fines to ensure that a strong message is sent to employers who put workers in danger. But because most workers in this industry are assigned to worksites on short notice and do not stay on-site for very long, OSHA does not usually know when tower workers are at risk and cannot schedule inspections that might identify hazards *before* a worker is hurt or killed. So in addition to enforcement, much of our focus is on outreach and education.

In response to the jump in fatalities in early 2014, we implemented a national outreach campaign using traditional, digital and social media, including a tower safety webpage. We framed the campaign with the powerful slogan, "No More Falling Workers."

OSHA has been working with the National Association of Tower Erectors (or NATE) to promote safety within the tower industry. NATE promoted our fall prevention stand-down and we are working with their leadership to help them understand how to contribute to future rulemaking. And, NATE has announced a 100% tie-off policy and campaign!

This is in addition to a letter I sent concerning communication tower hazards to 100 communication tower companies and 26 state wireless associations for distribution to their membership. And, NATE distributed this letter to their membership and posted it on their website.

We also supported the development of a tower climber certification course organized by NATE and Above Ground Magazine. This first certification course was completed this summer as nine participants from numerous groups became "Authorized Climbers," including an OSHA engineer and one of our attorneys. This valuable training helped NATE executives, OSHA, and other industry personnel to gain practical experience in tower climbing.

We have been helping the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) to develop a registered apprenticeship program for tower climbers, which will be signed today.

We recognize that this industry has a complex and somewhat unique structure - with multiple levels of contracting and subcontracting, from the giant telecoms and firms that broadcast signals, to the companies, often the very small companies, whose workers build, maintain and repair the towers.

We believe that many of these fatal incidents are related to the subcontracting of jobs to smaller employers who may overlook safety requirements because they are under pressure to complete jobs quickly and inexpensively.

Today, OSHA and the FCC are calling on everyone in the industry - from the major cell carriers to the owners of the towers, from the tower maintenance companies down to the firms who employ the climbers - to take responsibility for worker safety.

We are very pleased to be working together with the FCC to reduce these needless fatalities and injuries.

As I have said, a lot has been done to improve worker safety in this industry - but we need to do much more. There is no reason that a cellular industry that excels in enabling us to receive clear messages on our phones from people around the world cannot also ensure that a clear safety message is communicated from the original order for a new antenna or repair down to the worker who climbing a tower with tools on his belt. This is not an impossible task; it should not be a difficult task. It is a task that we must achieve, working together.

I am grateful that Chairman Wheeler and Secretary Perez are committed to taking this next step so that we can make sure these tragedies aren't written off as the cost of doing business. We appreciate the FCC joining our initiative to reduce these needless fatalities and injuries. I look forward to our continued collaboration with all of you and all of our stakeholders. Each of us has an important role to play in worker safety and together we can turn this tide to prevent more unnecessary and unfortunate deaths, such as Ronaldo Smith.

Thank you again for being here and for your interest in protecting tower workers. After our next speaker, we will have two panel discussions; the first panel will address the challenges that are facing this rapidly growing industry. The second panel will identify some of the best practices that are being used in the industry today. Following the workshops, we will sign the agreement on an exciting new apprenticeship program for communication tower workers.

Now, I would like to introduce our next speaker, Kathy Pierce. Kathy is the mother of Chad Weller, a young tower climber who was killed earlier this year in Maryland. We were honored to work with Kathy, who has been a great partner in our efforts to help prevent tower worker fatalities by sharing her compelling and unfortunate story. She is here as testament of the unspeakable heartbreak of losing a child - an endless pain that no one deserves to endure. And I am humbled by her courage and resolve to turn tragedy into hope. Again, thank you for your interest and I am pleased to welcome Kathy Pierce.