

Grieving niece from Lincoln gets OSHA ear

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Grieving family seeks workplace safety

Tonya Ford wants safer workplaces - and she's willing to go into grim detail to make her case. [Read more](#)

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Robert Fitch

A Lincoln man who died Thursday morning after a fall at the Archer Daniels Midland plant in southwest Lincoln will be remembered as a good fam... [Read more](#)

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A worker at a meat-processing plant in Nebraska City died after falling from a hydraulic lift early Saturday. [Read more](#)

Lincoln resident Tonya Ford, who went public recently with her concerns about workplace safety, has been invited to Washington and will speak Thursday to officials from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Ford's uncle Bobby Fitch died as a result of a January 2009 fall of some 70 feet at the Archer Daniels Midland grain-milling plant in southwest Lincoln.

"I was honored," Ford said as she described her reaction to a request to represent the Kentucky-based U.S. Memorial Work Fatalities at a first-ever OSHA Listens session.

"I'm going and representing not only my Uncle Bobby, but I'm also representing 16 other men and women who died in Nebraska alone from work-related accidents."

The OSHA count on workplace fatalities in the state for the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 is 16.

In January -- a year and a day after Fitch's death -- a worker died in a manlift accident in Nebraska City.

Much of Ford's concern -- and the concern of other members of Fitch's family -- involves the mechanically powered lifts commonly used to move people up and down grain elevator shafts.

They believe Bobby Fitch died because the ADM manlift is not surrounded by a safety cage that could prevent a fall if a rider loses his or her balance.

"It's not just at ADM that things need to change," Ford said. "It's all grain elevators ... and they're all over the U.S. There's thousands of them."

In recent weeks, the Illinois-based ADM has announced it is replacing the Lincoln manlift and others like it at the Lincoln grain mill with conveyances that have partial walls and doors.

"I think companies need to be aware of everybody's working habits," Ford said, "and the safety of employees. Going to work should not be something you die at.

"It's the employer's responsibility to make it safe."

For the Fitch family, one of the unsettling points about the Lincoln manlift is that it was in place prior to 1974. That means, according to a January comment from an OSHA official, that it doesn't have to meet the design criteria put in place that year.

Ford, 30, and the mother of two school-age children, hopes her voice can help push OSHA, and perhaps Congress, in a more responsible direction.

"They need to get rid of the grandfather clause."

She's been told she will have just a few minutes to make her points, but she wants to use part of her time to talk about how OSHA treats victims' families.

"We felt like they didn't feel like family was that important," she said.

Ben Bare, based in Omaha with the Nebraska OSHA office, said he wants to know what Ford has to say.

"We're certainly interested in hearing what the issues might be and in improving communication with families and support of families."

In an OSHA announcement, Thursday's session was billed as an opportunity for the public to weigh in on topics including "important emerging or unaddressed health and safety issues in the workplace."

The Lincoln-based Nebraska Appleseed also is scheduled to provide testimony Thursday on meatpacking safety concerns, especially line speed and speed of work. The prime reference point will be a recent survey of 455 meatpacking workers in five Nebraska communities.

Ford is part of an opening panel made up entirely of people who have lost someone in a workplace accident.

She said the impact of her uncle's death on her 9-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter helped shape her planned OSHA remarks.

"They're at a point where they know nobody can bring Uncle Bobby back," she said, "but they want to make sure it doesn't happen to anybody else."

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