

# High stakes

By Helena Bryan



Falls from elevations hit hardest in the residential construction industry. But despite the deadly dangers of working from a height, too few employers plan for fall protection.



*“It’s a kind of Wild West of the construction industry. If challenged, some people will just pick up their tools and run; others will say, ‘Go ahead. Put me in jail.’ What we’re looking at is changing the culture. And that’s never easy.”*

– Gary McComb, WorkSafeBC regional prevention manager for residential construction

Apprentice carpenter Cory Richardson of Sawchuk Developments demonstrates the safety measures required for roofing construction, which include fall restraint gear that’s been tied off.

In the seconds it took for 33-year-old Cory Richardson to slide over the frost-laden edge of the townhouse roof where he was working, the apprentice carpenter was hit – with gunshot clarity – by the way life can turn on a dime, and how slender the margin between a beating heart and one that’s gone still.

His was pounding so hard he could hear its pulse. Suspended 30 centimetres beneath the soffit and staring down at the ice-hardened ground 7 metres below, Richardson thanked God he’d started this day like any other: by buckling himself into his body harness and lanyard. Then he thought about his wife and two small children. “They’re the reason I’ve never complained about putting my fall protection gear on,” he says. “I want to go home to them at the end of every day.”

### Workers require daily reminders

Fortunately, Richardson’s employer, Kelowna’s Sawchuk Developments, had done its part to protect workers from falls. The company provides its workers fall protection training as part of an initial safety orientation, as well as regular, on-the-job “refreshers,” and fall-protection gear that’s been CSA-approved and properly inspected (see [Gearing up](#)). Richardson had clearly taken this training to heart.

In addition to using the right equipment, planning, training, and supervision are critical elements of a successful fall protection system. A WorkSafeBC study found 27 percent of falls between 2000 and 2004 involved workers wearing fall protection gear, either not tied off to a suitable anchor or tied off at all. Sawchuk requires its foremen and superintendents to create daily fall protection plans for each site and to monitor their employees

to ensure they are using their safety equipment properly.

While Richardson was back on the job in less than half an hour after his fall on that icy January 9th morning, the company took full advantage of the lessons this incident afforded. A memo was sent out to all sites for discussion at the toolbox talks. “The feedback was amazing,” says Charlie Hamilton, Sawchuk’s safety and training coordinator. “Our employees told us the incident with Richardson confirmed the importance for each of them to take a few extra minutes every day to check and properly maintain their fall protection gear.”

### Fall costs on the rise

The construction industry has yet to truly understand the deadly stakes associated with being careless about fall protection, says Al Johnson, WorkSafeBC director, Lower Mainland Construction and Hospitality. Johnson points out that falls from elevations of 3 metres (10 ft.) or more hurt more people, at a higher cost, than any other injury. These incidents, he says, often lead to the most serious injuries with the longest recovery periods. “A recent incident involved somebody falling from a height of only 1.8 metres (6 ft.), but he landed on concrete,” Johnson says. “That person is now dealing with a major head injury and multiple broken bones.”

According to WorkSafeBC’s risk management statistics, between 2004 and 2008, falls from elevations on construction sites around the province racked up \$229 million in claim costs (in comparison, the service and manufacturing sectors accounted for \$99 million, and \$89 million, respectively). What’s worse, 19 of those falls were fatal: 19 men or women whose loved ones will never again hear them say, “Hey – I’m home.”

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Cory Richardson of Sawchuk Developments says he works for a company that takes fall protection seriously. Falls from elevations currently account for the highest number of injuries with the highest claim costs.

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## Toll deadliest for home builders

The residential construction sector that employs Richardson is responsible for an inordinate number of falls. Most of these incidents occur because of inadequate guarding on open stairwells and skylight holes, or missing guardrails on balconies and floor edges. Slips off roofs – such as Richardson’s – and falls involving ladders are a major problem. Altogether, these types of falls accounted for 62 percent of claim costs in this sector between 2005 and 2007, the highest per-claim costs of \$38,000, an average claim duration of 88 days, and a total of 166,000 lost days of work.

And yet, the industry faces huge challenges if it wants to reduce these numbers, says Gary McComb, WorkSafeBC regional prevention manager for residential construction; particularly in boom times, when labor is so tight that even the poorly skilled, ill trained, and fly-by-night can make a few extra dollars. “This sector isn’t very organized. Many of the companies are independent, nomadic, and anti-regulation. And safety isn’t a core value,” McComb says.

“The focus is on getting the work without a systemized approach to anything. It’s a kind of Wild West of the construction industry. If challenged, some people will just pick up their tools and run; others will say, ‘Go ahead. Put me in jail.’ What we’re looking at is changing the culture. And that’s never easy.”

McComb’s Wild West metaphor is supported by the stats. According to Grant McMillan, president of the Council of Construction Associations (COCA), more than 30,000 of the 32,000 construction employers in the province can be classified

as small to very small. “They are difficult to reach and in constant flux,” McMillan says. “Every year, about 7,000 of these employers register with WorkSafeBC and about 7,000 de-register.”

The fact that young and inexperienced workers gravitate to the residential sector only adds to the challenges around safety promotion. While energetic and enthusiastic, young workers are often inexperienced and lack the confidence to refuse unsafe work, McMillan says. And the economic downturn brings a new hurdle: “Employers will be more motivated to cut corners and less likely to pay the \$200 to \$300 cost per employee for fall protection gear.”

## Prevention groups adopt tough tactics

Still, none of these issues is impossible to solve without proper planning, McComb says. “After all, we were dealing with the same problem in concrete construction 15 years ago or so. Now, it’s the norm in that sector to plan, train, and supervise for fall protection.” But that kind of shift is a long-term proposition, he says. “It takes a sustained, concentrated approach – with a big commitment to planning ahead.”

Just such an approach is contained in WorkSafeBC’s Construction High-Risk Strategy 2009 (available on [WorkSafeBC.com](http://WorkSafeBC.com)), one part of which advocates a group of field officers solely focusing their energies on single-family house construction in a particular geographic area. “And we have to err on the side of safety,” McComb says. “If we see high-risk activity, we have to be prepared to shut down that site.”

As well, both WorkSafeBC and the Construction Safety Association of B.C. (CSABC) are working together to boost awareness. The CSABC has fall protection

information on its web site and regularly covers fall protection in members' bulletins, and it routinely raises the topic at home building conferences and shows. It's not a matter of a lack of information, McMillan says, but rather, the need to get the information into the right hands.

Fortunately for employees such as Richardson, the company he happened to be working for on that fateful January day has been working hard to ensure a fall protection plan is in place. "After his fall, Cory took a good look at the (no longer useable) harness and lanyard that saved him from serious injury...or worse," Hamilton recalls. "Needless to say, we're more than happy to report he didn't even have a bruise."

### Safety experts for hire

"Help is available to the people who are looking for it," says Grant McMillan, president of the Council of Construction Associations (COCA). McMillan refers most people to the Construction Safety Association of B.C. (CSABC), which provides specialized fall protection training anywhere in the province for groups who can identify the need for it.

### Fall-safe resources

For more information on fall protection, check out the following:

WorkSafeBC's construction portal on falls at [www2.worksafebc.com/Portals/construction/Top3AccidentTypes-Falls.asp](http://www2.worksafebc.com/Portals/construction/Top3AccidentTypes-Falls.asp) (includes links to bulletins, checklists, hazard alerts, toolbox meeting guides, courses, guidelines, and more)

You're a Pro videos at [www2.worksafebc.com/Publications/Multimedia/Videos.asp?ReportID=34741](http://www2.worksafebc.com/Publications/Multimedia/Videos.asp?ReportID=34741) (also available in Punjabi)

The Construction Safety Association of B.C. (CSABC) web site at [www.csabc.ca](http://www.csabc.ca) (look under "New Courses" in the right-hand margin)

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