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Public Employee Press

Watershed worker dies in pipeline

By **MOLLY CHARBONEAU**

Local 376 member Archie Tyler, 43, drowned in the Bronx on March 4 when rushing water pulled him down a drainage pipe in the Jerome Park Reservoir.

At the time, Mr. Tyler, a Watershed Maintainer, and co-workers were working to prevent West Nile virus outbreaks. They were clearing debris from the pipe opening so a football-field sized accumulation of 2-foot-deep water would not become a breeding ground for infected mosquitoes.

DC 37 dispatched a delegation to the site as soon as the Dept. of Environmental Protection (DEP) notified the union of Mr. Tyler's death.

Local 376 President Ed Bennett, DC 37 Deputy Administrator Zachary Ramsey, Blue Collar Division Director José Sierra, DC 37 Rep David Catala and Russell Johnson of DC 37's Safety and Health Unit rushed to the Bronx to offer support to shaken union members and Mr. Tyler's family and loved ones.

"The fact that his co-workers were unable to save the man's life is a tragedy in itself," said Mr. Catala. "They tried to hold onto him, but the force of the water was just too great."

The union is now pressing the state's Public Employee Safety and Health (PESH) unit to investigate why DEP apparently failed to have the proper safety measures and training in place to prevent this terrible fatality — the third death of a District Council 37 member at DEP in a little over two years.

Watershed Maintainer Archie Tyler was working to prevent West Nile virus outbreaks when he was killed. His death, the Dept. of Environmental Protection's third on-the-job fatality in two years, has renewed union pressure for safer working conditions.

"If you saw the drain and the water, you really wouldn't expect that cleaning the drain could put your life at risk," said Mr. Bennett, whose local also represents Construction Laborers and Highway Repairers. "Still, DEP had a responsibility to evaluate the job for any possible hazards, which could have prevented this tragedy."

After interviewing members and inspecting, Rebecca Porper of the Safety Unit concluded that the site was "an accident waiting to happen."

Ms. Porper said members faced risks even before they reached the 20-inch diameter drain where Mr. Tyler lost his life. She pointed these out to PESH and DEP at a March 12 conference opening the state's fatality investigation. "The most glaring problem was that the drain opening itself had no grate or cover in place to prevent someone from falling in," she said. DEP had issued "ice rescue" suits that were not designed for the work they were doing, so the footing was poor on the algae-clad reservoir bottom. The agency also failed to provide a secure tripod or other fixture near the pipe opening where workers could attach protective harnesses.

"An overriding issue is that DEP has still not implemented good, strong safety procedures for our members who work there, and the agency won't do anything unless it is pushed," Local 376 Deputy Administrator Bill Fenty stated. "Our blue collar members in this agency do extremely dangerous jobs, and the agency refuses to recognize this."