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PROMOTIONS

DEADLY ELEVATOR MISHAPS ON RISE

By BRAD HAMILTON and ASHLEY CROSS



RISING PROBLEM: Superintendent "Jose" stands in an elevator at 174 Avenue A, which the Post found had insufficient inspections since '01.

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August 31, 2003 -- Elevator safety in New York is plummeting.

Accidents are at a 10-year high, with seven people killed and dozens hurt among 91 mishaps in city buildings from January 2002 through June of this year, records show.

There were 61 accidents last year, the most since 1992 and a 17 percent increase over the 52 incidents in 2001. There were 30 elevator accidents to June 11 this year.

Incidents included victims falling down elevator shafts, others being crushed by elevators, elevators plunging to the basement after cable breaks and passengers trapped for hours in stalled elevator cars.

Experts aren't sure why a ride to your apartment or office has become more dangerous in the last two years. But part of the problem could be inspections.

The city requires elevators to be inspected at least five times every two years.

But a check by The Post last week at 50 randomly selected buildings in Manhattan, Brooklyn and The Bronx found 35 elevators of the 61 that

reporters examined had not been inspected in accordance with city rules, based on entries on each elevator's inspection certificate.

And 12 of those elevators found to have deficient inspection certificates were later found to be listed as compliant with city rules on Buildings Department records because landlords had submitted their own safety reports.

Since 1996, when the current rules were set, the city has permitted two of the five necessary inspections to be supplied by building owners, as long as the accredited private inspector used by the owner filed paperwork with the city and signed the elevator inspection card.

Of the 61 elevators The Post inspected, 30 had no record on their inspection certificates of the so-called "self-inspections" landlords had told the Buildings Department about.

The discrepancies could be fraud by the owners, a spokesman for the Buildings Department said. The spokesman said the department would conduct its own probe into the information revealed by The Post's investigation.

Even when self-inspections are taken into account, many city elevators still aren't being inspected often enough, The Post found.

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For example, city records show that some of the elevators at the Empire State Building have been checked only twice since 2001, although the building isn't listed in any recent accident reports.

In 1999, the City Council issued a report called "Uneasy Ride" that ripped the Buildings Department for not doing the required number of inspections, conducting poor-quality inspections and failing to monitor building owners' compliance with the laws.

Four years later, many of those problems still plague the inspection process, The Post found.

For example, the report said that inspectors are underpaid and not equipped with the right tools to do proper checks.

The Buildings Department last week acknowledged that its examiners are paid less than those in other major cities but insisted low pay did not mean sloppy inspections.

The department also confirmed its elevator inspectors do not have gauges to test door and cable strength, although a commitment was given to provide those tools soon.

"It's on the top of our to-do list," said spokesman Sid Dinsay.

He added that one theory for the spike in elevator accidents could be the result of better reporting by building owners.

Hubert Hayes, an elevator expert from Brooklyn who served as a consultant on "Uneasy Ride," said inspectors were still not doing the kind of inspections required by the city's administrative code.

"The Buildings Department has not improved their system since 1996," Hayes said.

As an example, Hayes claimed inspectors often fail to check key components such as the jib brackets that hold hallway elevator doors in place when the elevator is not on that floor.

Problems with jib brackets have been cited as the reason for several accidents in recent years where people leaned on closed elevator doors and they unexpectedly swung open and the victims fell into the shaft.

Since a corruption scandal in 1996 rocked the Buildings Department - 42 of its 58 inspectors were suspended and eight eventually pleaded guilty to federal extortion charges - the bulk of inspections on the city's 56,000 elevators have been farmed out to private firms.

Contracts are currently held by EIC Inspection in Jersey City, Landmark Elevator Consultants in Wantagh and National Elevator Inspection in Rosedale.

The outside firms did 93 percent of the 66,570 inspections in 2002. They were paid \$50 an inspection - one quarter the \$216 examiners get in New Jersey - and do their inspections much faster than the city's 33 inspectors.

By law, the private examiners are allowed to do up to 12 inspections per day, while the standard for city inspectors is an average of 3 1/2 exams per day in 2002.

"The problem is [private inspectors] are looking for quantity, not quality," said one city inspector, who asked not to be named.

"Given the amount of time they're spending in the buildings, I'd be surprised if the work was being done right."

None of three firms used by the city returned repeated phone calls seeking comment.

Elevator accident reports reviewed by The Post also showed that in many cases the Buildings Department could not determine what went wrong, even when a death or serious injury resulted.

Dinsay, the Buildings Department spokesman, defended the city's record on accident investigations.

"There is follow-up. We do our best to look for a cause, but there may be cases where we may not have a conclusion," he said.

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