Park Valley Church Disaster Relief Team

Supporting Chainsaw crews during disaster relief efforts

The Park Valley Church Disaster Relief Team is forbidden to operate chainsaws regardless of training, experience, or host team insurance coverage while being supported by Park Valley Church during a deployment. Volunteers desiring to operate chainsaws should consider self-deploying independent of Park Valley Church.

The following Job Aid describes the hazards, and best practices of operating in close proximity of supporting chain saw operators.

Scope of Task:
Volunteers assist chainsaw crews by clearing debris, moving cut tree limbs, and removing brush after wind-driven disasters like tornadoes or hurricanes. Volunteers work near operating chainsaws and must handle trees, brush, and other debris, presenting significant safety hazards.

Hazards and Risk Mitigation:

1. Proximity to Chainsaws
- Hazards: Chainsaw kickback, flying debris, and accidental contact with the chain can cause severe injuries.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Maintain a safe distance from the chainsaw operator (at least two tree lengths away).
  - Stay out of the direct path of the chain and operator's movement.
  - Only approach the saw operator after they have powered down the chainsaw.

2. Chainsaw Malfunctions
- Hazards: Chains coming off the saw, blade malfunctions, or mechanical failures can endanger bystanders.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Position to the side of the operator within the peripheral line of sight. Be on the alert for communication gestures by the chainsaw operator.
  - Be ready to pivot out of harm's way in the event a dangerous condition develops.
  - Volunteers must stay alert to any unusual noise or malfunction and back away immediately if something seems wrong.

3. Fallen Trees Under Spring Tension
- Hazards: Fallen or partially fallen trees may be under extreme pressure (spring tension). Cutting can release this tension suddenly, causing the tree to snap or shift unexpectedly.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Volunteers should never stand near or on a tree being cut. Stay clear until the crew confirms it is safe.

- Chainsaw operators should communicate cutting plans to the ground crew, specifying where and when they will cut.
- Stay out of the potential path of movement when tension is released.

4. Noise and Debris

- Hazards: Chainsaws produce high noise levels, potentially damaging hearing. Cutting trees and brush can send debris flying, leading to eye or skin injuries.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Always wear hearing protection (earplugs or earmuffs).
  - Wear eye protection (goggles or safety glasses) to shield against debris.
  - Clear the work area of unnecessary personnel before any cutting begins.

5. Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

- Hazards: These plants, often found in brush and around trees, can cause severe skin irritation, rashes, and allergic reactions.
  - Poison Ivy: Three-pointed leaves, often glossy and grows as a vine or shrub.
  - Poison Oak: Similar to poison ivy, but its leaves resemble oak leaves, and it grows as a shrub. Avoid all fuzzy vines – they are all poison oak!
  - Poison Sumac: Grows as a small tree or tall shrub with 7-13 smooth-edged leaflets.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Wear long sleeves, long pants, and heavy-duty gloves when handling brush to minimize skin exposure.
  - Wash any exposed skin immediately with soap and water if contact with the plant is suspected.
  - Avoid touching your face, especially eyes and mouth, while working near brush.
  - Wash all tools, clothing, and gloves after exposure to remove plant oils.

6. Communication

- Hazards: Poor communication can lead to confusion and accidents when working near chainsaw crews.
- *Mitigation:*
  - Use clear hand signals and maintain eye contact with the chainsaw operator when approaching them.
  - Establish communication protocols, including stop signals for emergencies, before starting.
  - Volunteers should ensure they have the chainsaw operator's attention before moving in.

Risk Mitigation Steps:

- Pre-Task Briefing: Review safety protocols and communication signals with the team. Ensure all volunteers know their positions and tasks.
- Continuous Situational Awareness: Constantly assess the environment, particularly for unstable trees, hidden obstacles, and equipment malfunctions.

Teamwork and Coordination: Work in pairs to ensure mutual safety and accountability. Never work alone around chainsaws or fallen trees.

Recommended Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):

- Hearing protection (earplugs or earmuffs)
- Eye protection (safety glasses or goggles)
- Heavy-duty gloves (cut-resistant)
- Hard hat (to protect against falling debris)
- Steel-toed boots (to prevent foot injuries from falling objects)
- High-visibility vest (to improve visibility in the work zone)
- Long sleeves and pants (to protect against poison ivy, oak, and sumac)

Remember: Your safety is the top priority. Stay alert, maintain communication with chainsaw operators, and never attempt to handle tasks beyond your training. If you are unsure of a situation, stop and ask for help.