

Deadly Collapse at Amazon Warehouse Puts Spotlight on Phone Ban

Spencer Soper 1 day ago



Like 472 Comments | 725

RELATED QUOTES

AMZN -1.12% ▼



(Bloomberg) -- An Amazon.com Inc. warehouse collapse on Friday night that killed at least six people has amplified concerns among its blue collar workforce about the return of the internet retailer's mobile phone ban in work areas.



© Photographer: Michael B. Thomas/Getty Images North America Tornado Hits Amazon Warehouse In Edwardsville, Illinois

Most Read from Bloomberg

- Zero Taxes, Golf and Beach Houses Create a Crypto Island Paradise
- Anatomy of a Bad Road
- China Is Building the World's Largest National Park System

472

The 15 Best Beers We Drank This Year

The warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, near St. Louis, was reduced to rubble when a string of tornadoes ripped through six states, leaving a trail of destruction that stretched more than 200 miles. Emergency responders expect recovery efforts to continue into next week.

citi
Earn up to \$1,500. Open a new eligible checking account with required activities.
[LEARN MORE](#)

Capital One
0.70% APY
Member FDIC
[OPEN ACCOUNT](#)

Marcus
by Goldman Sachs
Goldman Sachs Bank USA
Member FDIC
0.50% APY
[OPEN ACCOUNT](#)

Sponsors of [GOBankingRates](#) Advertiser Disclosure

Amazon had for years prohibited workers from carrying their phones on warehouse floors, requiring them to leave them in vehicles or employee lockers before passing through security checks that include metal detectors. The company backed off during the pandemic, but has been gradually reintroducing it at facilities around the country.

Five Amazon employees, including two who work across the street from the building that collapsed, said they want access to information such as updates on potentially deadly weather events through their smartphones -- without interference from Amazon.

The phones can also help them communicate with emergency responders or loved ones if they are trapped, they said. "After these deaths, there is no way in hell I am relying on Amazon to keep me safe," said one worker from a neighboring Amazon facility in Illinois. "If they institute the no cell phone policy, I am resigning."

Biden Approves Help for Kentucky After Tornadoes Kill Dozens

Another worker from an Amazon warehouse in Indiana said she is using up her paid time off whenever the company decides to remain open despite warnings of extreme weather events. Having her phone with her is critical to making those decisions, especially about sudden tornado risks, she said.

"I don't trust them with my safety to be quite frank," she said. "If there's severe weather on the way, I think I should be able to make my own decision about safety."

Amazon declined to address the concerns raised by workers about its mobile phone policy, saying its focus now is "on assisting the brave first responders on the scene and supporting our affected employees and partners in the area."

The concerns about phone access highlight the deep distrust between executives who make rules focused on productivity and efficiency to gain a competitive advantage, and hourly front-line workers who often fear their safety is secondary to moving packages.

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the world's wealthiest man after Elon Musk, only fueled such feelings by spending the earlier part of Saturday celebrating a celebrity space launch by his company Blue Origin. Emergency crews at the warehouse dug through rubble looking for bodies.

At around 8 p.m. Central time, Bezos tweeted to offer his well wishes.

One person familiar with Amazon's warehouse construction said the buildings are designed to local standards that account for events such as severe storms and snow loads. Warehouses in tornado-prone areas include space that is more heavily reinforced with extra steel and concrete where workers are instructed to huddle in event of emergencies, he said.

Still, extreme weather events can topple buildings. In 2018, two Amazon warehouse workers died in Baltimore when a building partially collapsed in a strong storm.

The National Weather Service puts out extreme weather alerts via text messages, letting the public know in advance about dangerous conditions.

Tornadoes are trickier to anticipate than hurricanes and snowstorms, but the weather service still issues warnings to those in their path. The weather service sent such a warning at about 8 p.m. local time Friday, about 30 minutes before the storm collapsed the Edwardsville Amazon delivery station, the workers said.

Two Amazon employees who work in a facility across the street said workers huddled in bathrooms to protect themselves from the storm, unaware the building across the street had collapsed. Power outages blocked communications. They were sent home from work after 11 p.m. when it was deemed safe to travel.

"After this, everyone is definitely afraid of not being able to keep their phones on them," one of the workers said. "Most employees that I've talked to don't keep their phones on them for personal conversation throughout the day, it's genuinely for situations like this."

Most Read from Bloomberg Businessweek

- From the Great Resignation to Lying Flat, Workers Are Opting Out
- The Hunt for a Single Shot to Defeat Omicron and All Coronaviruses
- Return-to-Office Chaos Is the Best Thing to Happen to Consultants Since Y2K

©2021 Bloomberg L.P.

NEWS POLL



To what extent do you personally approve or disapprove of companies instituting phone bans for workers in warehouse settings?

- Strongly approve
- Somewhat approve
- Somewhat disapprove

472

Other / No opinion

NEXT



 472

