

86-year old FedEx worker killed on Thanksgiving at air freight hub in Memphis, Tennessee

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Verna Mae Jackson, an 86-year-old package handler at FedEx's World Hub air freight facility in Memphis, Tennessee, died this Thanksgiving after she was crushed by a 2,500 pound loaded mail dolly. Jackson was reaching for a loose piece of mail sticking out of one of the containers when the tugger pulling the dolly started moving, trapping the 86-year-old beneath it.

Jeff Rosenblum, attorney for the family, told the *Daily Memphian* that Ms. Jackson climbed onto a dolly transporting package containers to be loaded on a plane in order to retrieve a loose piece of mail and put it into a different container. She was thrown off the dolly and subsequently crushed. According to Rosenblum, the tug driver did not perform the required safety checks before driving away.

The attorney blames the lack of adequate precautions, such as audible warning sounds before the machinery begins to move, for the 86-year-old's death. According to a redacted airport police report released on December 7, it was unclear that the horn was working, but the driver yelled "clear" and received a verbal go ahead to move.

Ms. Jackson worked at the "old hub" in Memphis where freight bound for large airports, including John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, are handled.

The job of package handler is a physically taxing job by any measure. According to the FedEx job description for warehouse package handlers on its website, employees are required to be able to lift 50 pound packages and maneuver any weight over 50 pounds with appropriate equipment and/or assistance from another person.

A job description from 2021 provides more detail about a package handler's duties:

- Loading, unloading, and sorting packages of various sizes and weights.
- Lifting, pushing, pulling, carrying, scanning, placing, bending, twisting and kneeling.
- Compiling, sealing and loading various packages.

The *Daily Memphian* reported that Jackson was one of a number of octogenarians working at FedEx, who must pass physical tests such as lifting 75 pounds.

The news site described the 86-year old as someone who liked to stay "busy." Speaking on behalf of Jackson's younger sister, Rosenblum said that Jackson loved her job. "She loved working at FedEx. She loved her co-workers. She was a young 86-year-old who was full of life and incredibly fit. She loved the camaraderie of her job," the attorney told the *Daily Memphian*.

The *Daily Memphian* interviewed two experts on the benefits of working for senior citizens. Melanie Keller, president and CEO of Meritan, which helps seniors with job retraining, spoke of the mental health benefits of working at an advanced age. "Everyone wants to feel valued and have the ability to contribute, regardless of age. Working is good for mental health and a sense of belonging," Keller stated.

Executive director of an adult daycare Herbie Krisle said, "Church work, volunteer work or in her (Jackson's) case, a job, makes social capacity possible. Many who don't have that sit at home and watch TV and sleep."

Comments reacting to news stories of the octogenarian's tragic death on social media were less sanguine. One person commented, "I don't know what's more heartbreaking, the horrible way this poor

lady died or the fact that she was still working at the age of 86!” Another asked, “Is her age correct? 86? How is an 86-year-old still working at a place like that?” Still another exclaimed, “OMG! That job is hard and she was in her 80s?!”

According to a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest growing segment of the workforce is people 55 years and older. While the labor force aged 16 to 24 is expected to shrink by 7.5 percent over the next decade, the labor force aged 75 and older is expected to grow by 96.5 percent.

The cause of the upward trend for retirement-aged workers in the workforce is that many are financially unable to retire, according to the Economic Policy Institute’s “The Older Workers and Retirement Chartbook” released in November 2022. The authors write, “Older workers who cannot afford to retire often face diminishing job quality and earnings as a result of loss of bargaining power” due to their age. Many end up in low-paying, physically demanding jobs without hope for a retirement.

The retirement crisis in America is often blamed on longer life spans and workers’ poor financial planning. However, a study cited in The Chartbook notes that other countries face similar longevity and financial planning challenges, yet workers in those countries experience better retirement outcomes.

The authors of the Chartbook note that the policy choices of the ruling elites over the last 40 years have put average and low-wage workers in the position of having to work well into old age. They state, “[Policy choices] weakened workers’ bargaining power, eroded the real value of the minimum wage and other labor standards, allowed employers to shift more responsibility for healthcare and retirement onto workers, and failed to protect workers from wage theft, employee misclassification, health and safety violations, and other abuses.”



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