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Shock Hazard Persisted After Con Ed's Inspection

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The underground wires that shocked two dogs on a sidewalk in the East Village on Tuesday had been inspected and found to be safe on Jan. 17, a Consolidated Edison spokesman said yesterday. That inspection date was the day after a woman was electrocuted two blocks away while walking her dogs, prompting citywide inspections for stray voltage in light poles, manhole covers, construction plates and service box lids.

The latest incident caused some to question whether Con Ed's inspections had been effective.

"Did they fix this problem or not?" said Gunnar Hellekson, 28, a dog owner in the East Village. "It's a simple question. Why can't we get a solid and trustworthy answer?" Mr. Hellekson has founded a group that runs a Web site, www.firstrunfriends.org/coned/, where citizens can report stray voltage. It is named the Jodie Lane Project for the woman who died on Jan. 16.

The Con Ed spokesman, Michael S. Clendenin, said the utility's inspections were "careful and thorough." He said he did not know why the site of the accident on Tuesday had suddenly developed a problem. "We too are looking for answers here," he said.

The incident on Tuesday was caused when a frayed underground wire coming from a service box electrified the sidewalk in front of the East Village Tobacco and Grocery store at 136 First Avenue, between Eighth and Ninth Streets. When Con Ed workers arrived, they found that the frayed wire had charged with 88 volts the metal meshing an inch beneath the wet pavement. Mr. Clendenin said the age of the wires at the location, which date back to the 1930's, may have been a factor.

"We depend on customers to call if they think there is a problem," Mr. Clendenin said. "We are also still very committed to conducting annual inspections of all service box and manhole covers in the city."

Many of the neighborhood's residents said they were not satisfied with Con Ed's efforts.

Cosmo Sanicola, 67, who for the last 25 years has run a Laundromat at 142 First Avenue, several feet from the site of Tuesday's accident, said that Con Ed's method of inspections might just be the problem. "They look, they check and they roll," he said. "That's not enough."

"I'm mad as hell," said Mark Bulvanoski, a 50-year-old construction worker and neighborhood resident whose two dogs were shocked on Tuesday but survived without injury. "It makes me want to leave New York," he said.

The accident comes almost two months after Ms. Lane, 30, was killed while walking her dogs along 11th Street near First Avenue. The day after her death, Con Edison began inspecting construction plates, manhole covers, light poles and street-level electrical boxes throughout the city, finding more than 300 with stray voltage, including 30 with more than 50 volts, enough to kill. After completing the inspections on Feb. 18, the utility said all the problems it found had been fixed.

Since then, Mr. Clendenin said that there were 27 new reports of locations with stray voltage. He said that eight were confirmed to have live current running through them and were immediately fixed.

"They keep talking about inspections and corrections," said Manny Hellen, president of Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers Union of America. "The questions are what kind of inspections and why not more permanent solutions?"

Mr. Hellen said inspections that require only an external check with a voltage meter were insufficient. He said that visual inspections, where workers actually open the manholes and service boxes and look at the wires, were far more effective in catching problems. Mr. Hellen also suggested that visual inspections were a first step toward identifying wiring and equipment in need of replacement.

"Repairing is not enough," he said, "Unless we start replacing the electrical infrastructure which is past its prime, we are going to see more of these accidents."

Such a proposal would prove more costly for the utility. "There are deeper issues here that Con Ed is going to have to confront," said Assemblyman Paul D. Tonko, a Schenectady Democrat and chairman of the Energy Committee, who is the sponsor of a bill requiring annual visual inspections of all underground wiring in New York City.

The bill, which is scheduled for a vote in the coming weeks, also requires the utility to report the problems it finds and how they are fixed. After Ms. Lane's death, the state's Public Service Commission required such an inspection report, and Con Ed is to present it on March 19.