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Local Business Giving New York Firefighters The Hook-Up

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Published: 08/02/2005 - 1:50pm

At 8 a.m. Jan. 23, five New York City firefighters found themselves trapped in a burning building in the Bronx.

They were out of options and jumped from a window 50 feet up. Two of the firefighters died, and three others were left with life-altering injuries.

Chris Higgins, general manager of Lebus Manufacturing in Longview, had never heard that story before Monday, when two New York firefighters were in town to see the first production of a new hook meant to help prevent that type of tragedy.

Even without knowing that story, Lebus had enough cause to want to help the New York firefighters and put the project into high gear.

"Just knowing what these guys have been through in the last four years – we felt like we needed

to do whatever they asked us to do," Higgins said.

That means producing 13,000 specialized hooks this week. The hooks will be part of a larger personal safety system that each of New York City's 12,500 firefighters will be equipped with in the coming months. Lebus, a subsidiary of Oklahoma-based The Crosby Group, makes products for the lifting industry, such as hooks and chain fittings.

Lt. Christian Delisio and firefighter George Grammas, with the New York City Fire Department, toured Lebus on Monday morning.

The department decided after the January incident to equip all the firefighters with personal safety systems, they said. The two men are part of a team that looked into different systems, but found none that worked as designed under real conditions, Delisio said.

The fire department instead developed its own system. It begins with a harness that firefighters are already wearing. A bag that carries the system attaches to the harness. The bag holds 50 feet of rope that is already attached to the "anchor," or hook, and a device that will control a firefighters' descent. The hook would latch onto a radiator (that's pronounced with a long 'a' if you're from Texas but a short 'a' if you're from New York) or a window, for instance.

The whole project will cost \$15 to \$20 million, including training firefighters to use the equipment.

The system, Grammas said, will give a firefighter who is having "the worst day of his life" an option.

The fire department initially tried to develop its own hook, but it didn't meet National Fire Protection Association requirements.

"We were at a standstill," Delisio said.

The department turned to Lebus, which already makes fittings for another part of the fire department. They contacted their regional Lebus representative, and about two months later, have their hooks.

"They were able to add the strength," Delisio said. Lebus' product is the first and only truly portable anchor, he said.

"Nobody had ever thought about a guy going out on a hook like this," he said.

Brad Beall, a product engineer with Crosby in Oklahoma, designed the hook.

"The main thing was the weight," he said. The fire department wanted to add as a little weight as possible to the 120 pounds of gear firefighters already carry.

The final hook weighs 13 ounces. In testing, it exceeded the National Fire Protection Association's load requirements for auxiliary equipment. There were no rules specifically pertaining to hooks.

Under those regulations, the tip of the hook must hold at least 1,124 pounds before it begins to lose its shape and 4,946 pounds without dropping its load.

The tip of the Lebus hook holds about 2,800 pounds before it starts to lose its shape and 6,345 pounds before it drops its load. The center of the hook – the "saddle" – is expected to hold 10,000 to 12,000 pounds, Beall said.

It will take Lebus about three days to manufacture all the hooks, Higgins said. Then, they will be shipped to another company so the rope can be sewn onto them. While this specific project hasn't required Lebus to hire more people, the company has added 25 employees this year and is trying to add more, an increase driven largely by the oil and gas industry, Higgins said.

The manufacturing process begins with bars of steel that are 20 feet long, he said. The bars are cut to about 11 inches long and 1 3/8 inches in diameter. They are then heated to about 2,300 degrees, Higgins said.

The metal is then forged – a process that takes place with what is essentially a giant, mechanical hammer fitted with a die, or pattern. A Lebus employee takes a heated, glowing rod and places it in the machine, which then pounds the steel into shape. The pounding sound echoes out of the Lebus facility, with the machine slightly shaking the ground around it as it works.

The excess steel is then trimmed away. The hook is heat-treated for strength before the tip is made into a point. The hook is then painted – red for the New York City Fire Department.

Delisio said he has no doubt the system and the hook Lebus is providing will work, adding that he would use it for his children.

"I just hope no one has to use it," he said.