An improperly used train approach warning led to a railroad worker's death after the worker was struck by a train in Queens Village, New York, in 2017, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) announced yesterday in its final report on the incident.

The accident occurred on June 10, 2017, when an MTA Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) train, on track three in multiple track territory, approached a five-member crew of roadway workers in the Queens Interlocking. The foreman and two roadway workers were conducting a walking inspection on Track 1, and were accompanied by the watchman. The fifth worker was clear of the tracks.

The watchman noticed the train approaching on track three, sounded a handheld horn, called out to the other workers and raised a paddle as a visual signal to the LIRR's locomotive engineer to sound the train's horn. When the engineer sounded the horn, three workers remained on Track 1, but the foreman stepped into the path of the moving train on Track 3 and was struck and killed, the NTSB officials said in a press release.

In its report, the train approach warning method was "particularly dangerous" for the crew working on the interlocking. Factors such as the multiple tracks, trains operating at high speeds in both directions, and the crews having limited areas to clear trains — combined with additional train traffic due to a nearby sports event — increased the risk of the crew being struck by a train, they said.
The watchmen on duty should have given the workers timely warning of approaching trains and all workers should have cleared the tracks prior to the train's arrival, the NTSB concluded.

"Using the train approach warning method, LIRR management did not properly assess the hazards the roadway workers were exposed to while conducting their tasks," said NTSB Chairman Robert Sumwalt.

If adopted, the recommendations highlighted in the report can help to mitigate risks associated with such work, he added.

Contributing to the accident was the railroad and rail union's allowance of overtime work schedules without considering and mitigating workers' risk of fatigue. Investigators had noted the watchmen and foreman had consecutive overtime shifts that disrupted their chance for restorative sleep during the 48 hours before the accident.

The NTSB issued two safety recommendations each to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). One recommendation was issued to the rail workers' union, the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers.

The recommendations address issues including roadway worker protection, roadway worker on-track safety briefings, management oversight, FRA oversight and worker fatigue.

To read the final report, click here.