

What to Do When Something Goes Wrong

By **William E. Balin**

As a sports coach for 13 years, I can attest to the fact that it is possible for a person or team to do everything correctly and still come up short. That statement applies not only to sports, but also to the excavating community as well as all other facets of life. The fact of the matter is that it is possible for an excavator to do everything right, from holding a pre-construction meeting to making a construction stage one-call to respecting the markings, and still cause an underground line to be damaged.

In addition to doing everything correct and causing damage, the industry must also contend with the damages that occur as a result of those that do not do everything correctly. Excuses for not doing things properly range from “I do not have the time to wait for the lines to be marked” to “If I do, someone else will step in and I will lose the job” to “I do not want to pay a small fee for making a one-call” and everything in between. According to the Common Ground Alliance (CGA) analysis of 2004 and 2005 data submitted to DIRT, stakeholder submitting facility events showed 56.6 percent of the events had a notification made to the One-Call notification center, while 43.4 percent did not. From this data, we can see that the one-call is made about half the time. However, when an accident happens, we must make sure that action is taken all of the time. Taking action will help to protect life, health, property and the environment. In addition, taking action will also increase your odds of not becoming a casualty.

Knowing How to Respond

Excavators, generally speaking, are not trained emergency responders; however, there are times when the excavator must act as such. Having said that, definitions can be found in the Common Ground Alliance Best Practices, Version 4.0 and throughout the various state laws as to who is an excavator. Simply stated, an excavator is anyone who disturbs the earth with mechanical or non-mechanical equipment with the intent to perform excavation or demolition work for himself or another person. This includes, but is not limited to, professional contractors, farmers, loggers, homeowners putting in a tree, fence, or mailbox post and



When damage to an underground facility occurs it is important to know the correct way to respond to keep damage from becoming a disaster, such as this house explosion in Oklahoma following a gas line hit.

the volunteer doing landscaping work for his or her local church. No matter who is the excavator at the time, the One-Call must be made. In the case of damage to an underground facility, the excavator, and/or his/her team member, if multiple workers are on site, must act to protect life, health and property. In addition, they must also take the necessary steps to notify the facility owner of the damage. Finally, in some cases, they must also notify the emergency response community of the damage.

The first part of this awareness message is in the case of a caused or discovered damage to an underground facility. The excavator, and/or his/her team members if multiple workers are on site, must act to protect life, health and property. Obviously, the actions taken will vary in large part to the type of facility that is damaged and the extent of the damage. The list below is not all inclusive of incidents or accidents, but is meant to start the thought process on how to react to an incident until the facility owner personnel and/or emergency responders arrive on scene.

- If the damage involves a volatile substance, generally a gas line, the area must be evacuated and the area secured so others could not enter. I recently saw a newscast that clearly showed gas blow-

ing out of a hole, as evidenced by dirt and rock blowing in the air. Just across the street from the hole, pedestrian traffic still persisted per the news footage. In this case, the area should have been void of any people, except the facility owner representatives and perhaps involved emergency responders. However, volatile substances are not the only lines that present a danger. Note: Never try to operate gas company valves or equipment or any equipment owned or operated by a facility owner/operator.

- A water line break could lead to roadway undermining and sinkholes. Do not allow traffic to enter the area.
- Electric facilities could “energize” an area and lead to electrocutions. In fact, concerning electric lines, they may be lying and seem calm, but are indeed energized. Do not let the calm give you a false sense of security. Do not approach or let others approach the line.
- Sewage line damages can lead to the spread of disease.
- Phone line damage could lead to service interruptions. This could be deadly if

someone in the home needs medical assistance immediately and cannot reach an ambulance because the phone does not work.

- Cable line damage would lead to a service interruption that could lead a person being cut off from the emergency broadcast system.

The list can go on and on, suffice it to say, that a lot needs to be thought of when damage occurs to an underground facility. The importance of this is evidenced by the Illinois Underground Utilities Facilities Damage Prevention Act, which states an emergency is “any condition constituting an imminent danger to life, health, or property or a utility service outage, and which requires immediate repair or action.”

Notification of Damage

Secondly, the person that has caused or discovered the damage must also take the necessary steps to notify the facility owner of the damage. In the case of a damaged gas line, please call the toll free phone number on the pipeline marker. Not only is this necessary so that the affected facility owner can make repairs, but so the facility owner can restore service if necessary. There may be some cases in which the damaged facility owner is not known. At that point, the state one-call center is an excellent resource to determine to whom the damaged line belongs. The Common Ground Alliance Best Practices Version 4.0, states that currently 48 states have passed one-call legislation and all 50 states have one-call centers and/or statues. In addition, the one-call center can be reached simply by dialing 811, the national call before you dig phone number, which will put you in contact with your state notification center. The one-call center will take your emergency one-call and pass the detailed information that you provide onto their facility owner members. If a facility owner is not a member of the one-call notification center, you will need to contact them directly.

Finally, in some cases, the person that has caused or discovered the damage not only must notify the affected facility owner, but must also notify the emergency response community of the damage. The Pipeline, Inspection, Protection, Enforcement and Safety Act of 2006 passed by the 109th US Congress states that a person who engages in demolition, excavation, tunneling, or construction and who causes damage to a pipeline facility that may endanger life or cause serious bodily harm or damage to property may not fail to promptly report the damage to the owner or operator of the facility; and if the damage results in the escape if any flammable, toxic, or corrosive

gas or liquid, may not fail to promptly report to other appropriate authorities by calling the 911 emergency telephone number.

In conclusion, it is indeed possible to do everything correct and still lose. It is how we respond to the loss that matters in the long run. When an accident happens, we must make sure that every step is taken to help protect life, health, property and the environment. In addition, taking action will also increase your odds of not becoming a casualty. The goal is to keep everyone safe and at the end of the day look back and say “job well done.” **UF**

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