



ONE MORE SCOOP

One More Scoop looks at issues involved in the prevention of damage to underground facilities. Each month, three industry leaders give their views on a specific topic. This month, our panel includes Ron Rosencrans, founder of *Underground Focus*; Don Heyer, operations/PR manager for USA North; and Walt Kelly, a consultant in underground facility damage prevention.

This month, our panel discusses the Pipeline, Inspection, Protection, Enforcement and Safety (PIPES) Act of 2006. The PIPES Act of 2006 passed by Congress states that if an excavator damages a pipeline and product is released, the excavator must call 911. Our panel examines how this Act is being communicated to excavators and the role of one-call centers in its promotion. Are one-call centers publicizing this portion of the Act and if not, why aren't they?



Ron's View

There has been so much death and destruction over the years resulting from gas line hits by excavators that it is scary to think that the message may not be getting out that you should call 911 if you hit a gas line. I've been told that only a few Call Centers routinely tell excavators to call 911.

Federal law (and CGA Best Practices) requires that 911 be called when there is a gas line hit. However, the law apparently does not require Call Centers to inform excavators of this requirement. That shouldn't necessarily be stated in the law, but there should be some guidelines somewhere that lay out a plan for making sure those who will have to carry out the law are aware of that law. Since Call Centers have traditionally been the clearing house for information on such matters, it would seem logical that they would handle this communication to excavators.

I have no evidence that excavators are unaware of the law, but I strongly suspect they are. There have been a lot of incidents over the

years that support my suspicions. Many are documented in the Digging Dangers videos. There was one where a city crew hit a gas line and called their supervisor's office instead of 911. By time he got the message, there had been an explosion and several were dead.

There was the accident that demolished part of downtown St. Cloud, Minn. after a crew hit a gas line while installing a utility pole. They reported the hit to their supervisor and left the site. Four people died and 11 were injured in the subsequent explosion. Another incident happened in Kansas where a crew called its supervisor after hitting a line. He was 45 minutes away. Before he could get to the site, there was an explosion that destroyed several houses. If 911 had been called in either of these cases, the fire department would have been on the scene in minutes and evacuated the buildings.

I vaguely remember another incident where the gas company was called instead of 911 when residents of a building smelled gas in an area where excavation had taken place the previous day. It was after regular working hours, and the gas company had trouble finding a technician to dispatch to the site. This took several hours as one technician after another had to decline the assignment because each had consumed alcohol and therefore was precluded from responding to a gas emergency. A qualified technician was finally found, but before that person could get to the site, there was a massive explosion that did considerable damage.

Again, a call to 911 would have brought emergency responders to the site within minutes and may have been able to prevent the explosion.

If Call Centers were to take on the task of informing excavators of the requirement to call 911 if they hit a gas line, extra work and expense would be involved. However, I don't see how Call Centers, in carrying out the damage prevention function, can just stop the process after informing their members when their lines need to be marked. A lot of damages occur after the lines have been marked, especially with gas lines.



Don's View

Since I cannot answer the question for all One Call Centers, I will answer the question for our One-Call Center. The simplest answer to the question of "Why don't one-call centers

publicize the component of 2006's PIPES Act that require excavators to call 911 if they hit a gas line?" is that we don't differentiate between each life-threatening situation. In our Center's view a life threatening situation of any type should call into 911 immediately whether it is a pipeline, electrical, water, etc.

We have worked diligently with the Common Ground Alliance through the Best Practice Committee to recognize various methods to accomplish this. The applicable Best Practices and how our Center responds are outline below:

5-14: Contact Names And Numbers Practice Statement: The excavator's designated competent person at each job site has access to the names and phone numbers of all facility owner/operator contacts and the one-call center. Our Center provides both emergency and regular contact phone numbers on our tickets which are available to the excavator on our website where he can print it out for free.

5-25: Notification Of Emergency Personnel Practice Statement: If the damage results in the escape of any flammable, toxic, or corrosive gas or liquid or endangers life, health, or property, the excavator responsible immediately notifies 911 and the facility owner/operator. The excavator takes reasonable measures to protect themselves and those in immediate danger, general public, property and the environment until the facility owner operator or emergency responders have arrived and completed their assessment. Our Center promotes the

call to 911 in the above situation as well as any other life-threatening situation.

5-30: Emergency Coordination with Adjacent Facilities Practice Statement: Emergency response planning includes coordination with emergency responders and other above and/or underground infrastructure facility owner/operators identified by the Incident Commander through the Incident Command System/Unified Command (ICS/UC) during an emergency. We support coordination between all affected parties prior to and in an emergency.

Our Center goes to the extent of providing the CGA Best Practices in booklet or CD form. Last year, we handed out approximately 5,000 copies of this document. In addition, we publish in our Excavation Manuals which contain the following for both damage and emergencies:

Damage/Exposed Notification:

An excavator discovering or causing damage to a subsurface installation shall notify the operator of the installation and USA North. USA North accepts damage/exposed notices from the excavator and transmits the notice to our members in the area of the damage. USA North will also provide the excavator with the emergency telephone number for the member whose facility was damaged.

Emergency Notification:

If the damage results in the escape of any flammable, toxic or corrosive gas or liquid or endangers life, health or property, the excavator responsible immediately notifies 911 and the facility owner/operator. The excavator takes reasonable measures to protect themselves and those in immediate danger, general public, property, and the environment until the facility owner/operator or emergency responders have arrived and completed their assessment.

Finally, in our SAFE Events, safety presentations, or the simple “5 Steps to a Safe Excavation,” we encourage the excavator to call 911 in a life-threatening situation. Do we often refer to the 2006 PIPES Act? No we don’t, however; we do promote the use of 911 all the time in any life-threatening situation.



Walt’s View

It would certainly be helpful to public safety if all notification centers conducted a concerted education program to get people to call 911 when gaslines are leaking after a damage. Some

state one-call centers, such as Louisiana and Minnesota, do that. On the other hand, there has already been a fair amount of education going on for more than a decade on the need for calling 911 after excavation damage.

Following pipeline incidents in the 1990s, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommended calling 911 to Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the American Public Works Assoc., Association of General Contractors, the National Utility Contractors Assoc. (NULCA), the Power and Communications Contractors Assoc. and the National Cable Television Assoc. The recommendation was to have these organizations promote the practice to their members.

In addition, at least half a dozen states have changed their statutes to require calling 911. NULCA recommended it in 1997.

In 1999, the Common Ground Alliance adopted a Best Practice (5.25) requiring a 911 call in addition to notifying the operator. California made an odd requirement in recent legislation, “If high priority subsurface installations are damaged and the operator cannot be contacted, the excavator shall call 911 emergency services.” Considering that this statute defines “high priority” as electric over 60,000 volts and gas over 60 psi, not many calls are mandatory!

Having investigated a number of incidents, as a state enforcement official and as an expert

witness, where 911 was not called right away, I fully agree that 911 should be called—for several reasons. First, fire and police departments can usually get there faster. Second, emergency responders are more effective than excavators at evacuation and keeping people out. People listen more to a uniformed responder.

Granted, neither the excavator nor the utility likes having lots of flashing red lights or media showing up after a hit. (That might help explain the California statute.)

According to the NTSB St. Cloud Report, “the director of the Minnesota Division of Emergency Management told Safety Board investigators that state 911 emergency call centers had recorded no noticeable increase in calls to 911 since enactment of the law and that, in the opinion of the official, the law has ensured more timely notification of authorities after excavation damage.”

In my home town, the fire chief at first was upset with the number of new calls, but realized they were worth it due to the potential danger. Bad incidents are low frequency, but high consequence. After a short while, the number of calls dropped because there were fewer hits. How about that? **UF**

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