



UTILITY STRIKES

How to Avoid These Dangerous & Costly Events

An underground utility strike can be a life threatening and costly event. According to Common Ground Alliance, a national utility industry safety organization, approximately 700,000 underground utility lines are struck annually, causing loss of life and injury, as well as substantial financial damage.

Repair costs for damaged underground utilities can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. While insurance may cover the cost to repair damage to underground utilities and legal fees attached to the claim, there may be additional costs that insurance policies might not cover, such as penalties and loss of contracts. If a strike causes nearby businesses to shut down, the entity responsible for the strike also may be on the hook for the businesses' interruption and provable lost profits as well.

Excavations are required on the majority of construction projects, and the majority of utilities, including gas, water, sewer, electric and telecom all are located underground. These facts suggest the high potential risk of hitting and damaging buried infrastructure during a construction project, regardless of the type of excavation tools used.

BY THE NUMBERS

Approximately 700,000 underground utility lines are struck annually, telecommunications being the #1 type of facility damaged followed by natural gas. – Safety Talk Ideas

EXCAVATION DANGERS

Utility strikes have resulted in \$1.7 billion in property damage, 1,906 injuries, and 421 deaths. – Common Ground Alliance

Why are utility strikes so common?

The majority of utility strikes occur as a result of one or a combination of the following reasons:

- Poor planning
- Accelerating project timelines
- Inaccurate utility plans or lack of information
- Improper excavation practices
- Limited use of cable avoidance instruments
- Lack of control and visibility associated with heavy machinery, such as excavators and drilling machines

Whenever the ground is disturbed underground utilities are likely going to be encountered, bringing site workers in close proximity to underground utilities. It's imperative that those performing the work know the exact location of all buried utilities before and during the excavation process.

What does this mean for contractors?

Safety, profitability, insurability and future business prospects are all concerns for contractors. Safety on the job is paramount. Regarding operational and profitability matters, issues include employee wait time and rising expenses caused by claims and site delays. Insurance costs might also be impacted by the jobsite's claim history. Another key concern is the possibility of damage to a contractor's reputation or brand and the potential ensuing loss of revenue and future business.

Best practices to mitigate damage and avoid utility strikes

Awareness of potential hazards, legislative requirements and best practices is a must for contractors.

✓ TRAIN YOUR CREW

Inadequate training is often the primary cause of a utility strike. Proper training on the detection of underground utilities, usage of equipment, and digging practices, including the use of radar and soft-digging techniques, is essential for all jobsite workers. On-site supervision, including jobsite checklists and ongoing safety training should be standard.

Don't forget to ask for help. Free training is provided by your local 811 call center. They are the experts and are willing to do all they can to prevent damage to their underground facilities.

BY THE NUMBERS

Every 9 minutes an underground utility line is damaged because someone decided to dig without first calling 811. – Common Ground Alliance

✓ CALL BEFORE YOU DIG

A large undertaking by the utility companies, contractors and associations resulted in The Dig Safe Act of 2016. The Dig Safe Act of 2016 requires any person with excavation plans to call 811 two to three days prior to digging. 811 notifies the utility owners of your plans and sends someone out to properly mark any utility lines within the affected area.

After utility locators have visited the site and proper notification has taken place, excavation can begin. Not only is an 811 call an important step in protecting public safety, failing to report excavation project can result in costly fines and delays.

Data shows that when you call 811 and follow the protocol, there is a less than 1% chance of striking a buried utility line. For more details on the regulations of The Dig Safe Act of 2016, visit: http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB661

✓ SITE RECONNAISSANCE

Conducting a site reconnaissance is an important step in avoiding a strike. Check utility records and look for any inconsistencies or conflicts. Identify manhole covers, utility markers and indications of historic excavations. Take photographs of the jobsite before the project starts including flags and other markings to illustrate the scale of the excavation site. The efforts a contractor takes to assess the site, identify underground utilities, and proceed with caution can bolster a contractor's defenses in the event of a strike and subsequent claim.

✓ PROPER ESTIMATES

Since time is money, consider the time needed to properly locate underground utilities and report excavation plans in your project estimates. Verifying markings, notifying 811, and digging around lines all impact your bottom line

There are many exposures to anticipate when excavating, disturbing underground utilities being one of the leading hazards. Take a proactive approach with a plan before you break ground to avoid dangerous and costly underground utility strikes.

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