

Contact Numbers Facilitate Excavator/Operator Communications

By Walt Kelly

The hut in the railroad parking lot looked like a communications shelter, but after three excavation notices, there was no paint around it. One member of the bore crew saw faded paint some distance away that pointed toward the hut. That prompted us to stop the bore and try to find the owner of the hut.

The railroad said it belonged to AT&T. AT&T said it wasn't theirs. Four communications companies were on the dig tickets, but phone numbers could not be found for two. The Call Center has a policy of not giving out contact phone numbers. Just "Call another ticket," the CSR said. I asked for a supervisor. When pressed, she said that although she was not allowed to give out the operator's phone number, she had heard that a contract locating firm had taken over that area. We called them.

They soon called back. "Thank goodness you called. We had not yet received maps for that area, but we finally did get them and will mark the major fiber optic line that your bore would have crossed." Damage prevented, but why does that call center and others like it sometimes make damage prevention so difficult?

The heart of damage prevention is communication between excavators and facility operators. But for a number of reasons, one call to the notification center does not always convey all the information that the locator needs and does not assure that the locator will get the lines accurately marked by the due date. Sometimes the area of work changes slightly. That is when the excavator needs to communicate with the locator directly.

Some notification centers understand this need and provide contact phone numbers to the excavators. Arizona prints facility operator phone numbers in its Excavator's Manuals. States like Minnesota, Mississippi, and Wisconsin provide the

information by phone or even in electronic format. But other states such as Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and the Dig Safe System in the northeast flatly refuse to give out any phone numbers. In the 14 states where I have called in tickets, six states have given contact phone numbers, eight have refused.

Reasons for not giving out phone numbers include: "If we give you the member's phone number, you would call them for locates and not use the center"; "The member's phone number is propriety information and cannot be given to an excavator"; "If we gave you the wrong number, you would sue us"; and "Our members do not want to be contacted by excavators."

Even though about 19 states allow excavators to notify operators directly about an excavation, why would an excavator want to make individual calls when most operators could be notified with one call? Calling the notification center allows the excavator more time to concentrate on tracking down the non-members. As far as phone numbers being "proprietary," virtually all states require the excavator to notify the operator in case of damage. Since the operators likely backed that legislation, why would they want their numbers kept secret? Federal regulations require certain pipelines to have signs with their contact phone numbers "wherever necessary... to reduce the possibility of damage or interference." Why would they want the call center to withhold the number?

Even though the contact phone number that cooperative call centers give is often the database administrator for the utility, they usually get us to the right person quickly. Then we can send maps and cover letters to make the locator's job easier. The number also goes on the list carried by each crew. Increased communication has greatly reduced damage for

the crews I work with.

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I don't recall complaints from any of the 2,000 utilities and locators I have dealt with when we called to point out unmarked facilities in the path of our plow. They're happy that we have their phone numbers.

Call centers usually have emergency contact numbers on-screen and will give them out in case of damage. It is strange that a center will give a phone number to report damage, but will not give out a number to prevent damage.

There are a number of times that an excavator needs to talk to the locator:

- He has soft-dug a hole 6 feet wide and 10 feet deep under the marks without finding the utility. Is the line mis-marked, or deeper than expected?
- There are no marks at the site. Does that mean the member companies named on the ticket have cleared the site, or just haven't marked it yet?
- There are signs of a utility, but no paint. Does that mean the utility is near, but does not cross the excavation?
- Marks get destroyed. The need for remarks can be explained on the phone. A separate ticket may be cleared because the locator figures "I just marked it, my marks should be good."

- A bore shot didn't work as planned. A new shot needs to be done several feet away. Is there anything else we need to be aware of?
- The utility under the marks doesn't look right. Is it the target line, or is it someone's abandoned or unmarked line?

Leon Glessing, a bore crew supervisor, says he wants contact phone numbers on site. "I don't want to call a second ticket because of the time factor. A call direct to the locator can get someone there quickly. It can take hours, or even a day for the request to get through the system to the facility operator and then to the locator. Most contractors are willing to wait an hour, but are not willing to stand around for a day. A soft dig crew can cost \$300 per hour. A plow on the railroad costs thousands of dollars an hour."

Glessing adds, "Having no hits saves time and headaches. The dig can be legal, but a hit costs everybody money."

The crew often cannot just pack up and go to another site. The hole generally cannot be left open. The usual process is to call the locator when the exposing hole has reached the width of the tolerance zone. The crew keeps expanding the hole until the locator gets there.

A utility can have a hard time collecting from the excavator if its line gets hit outside the tolerance zone - barring negligence, of course. But there is still a cost to the excavator for the hit. If it is a dangerous line, there is a strong possibility of serious injury or death. Explosions and leaks cause property and environmental damage. Even if it is "just" a phone or cable TV line, state law may require the operator be notified (even if the call center has refused to provide a phone number). The hole must be left open, a person has to stay at the site until the operator arrives, the crew has to wait, or

pack up to another site, only to have to return. And of course, the paperwork has to be filled out. Later, when the facility operator sends a bill, time must be spent by the excavator documenting the liability of the operator and the lack of liability on his part. Smart excavators

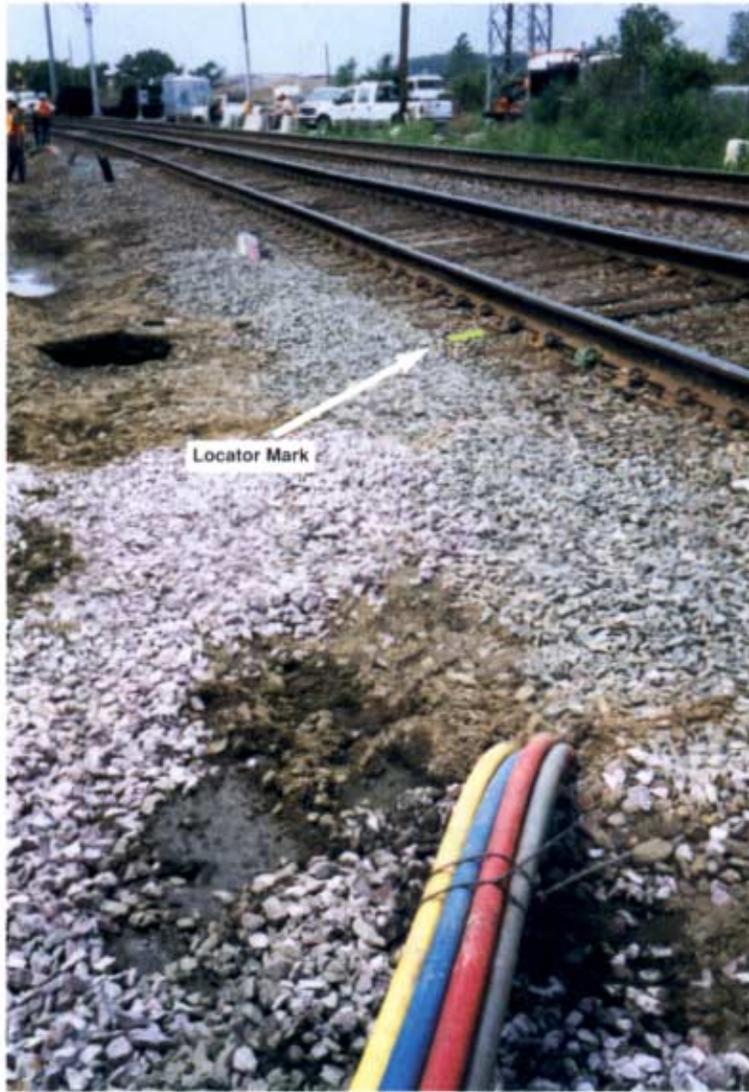
to find the town, area code, or even state where they are located. Adam Scott, a locate foreman for an international fiber optic installation crew, tells of spending hours on the phone. "I get an '800' number from the phone book. That gets me to a receptionist who passes the buck to other phone numbers. I spend 20 minutes talking to someone who then tells me 'I don't do that, try this guy.' That person tells me, 'We don't do that, (the One-Call Center) locates our lines.'"

"About once a day," Scott says, "I find evidence of a facility without paint - a pedestal or a valve box. It takes a lot of chasing down to find if it crosses our work or not. If I had the phone 'About once a day,' Scott number, I would call the owner and verify if it is clear or not."

Is this policy of not giving out contact phone numbers some holdover answer to an old problem of getting excavators to use the call center? Does that problem still exist?

Do today's call center board members and operator representatives know about the old policy of withholding contact phone numbers, and do they support it? Maybe it's time for the Boards of Directors of those call centers to review the policy in terms of: "Does withholding contact phone numbers reduce or increase damages?"

Walt Kelly consults in the area of damage prevention, serves as expert witness in damage lawsuits, and has called in over 10,000 excavation notices over 3,000 miles in the past three years. He can be reached at 507/454-5147 or walt@waltkelly.com



A high pressure gas line is marked with yellow paint on the railroad tie. Since there was no phone number for contacting the locator, and in the absence of any other marks, it was assumed the gas line simply crossed the RR right of way. The fiber conduits were carefully trenched past it to a Connecting bore shot. The bore crew was stunned when they found out that the gas line turned 90 degrees and paralleled their 400-foot bore shot with a clearance of between one and eight feet!

know it pays to avoid hits!

For the excavator, tracking down utility companies' phone numbers is most inefficient. Sometimes, due to buyouts or mergers, the correct name of the operator is not the one on the ticket. Next is trying