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Female Announcer (00:02):

You are listening to The Safety Moment Podcast by Utility Safety Partners. Safety is always a good conversation and it's a click away. Here's your host, Mike Sullivan.

Mike Sullivan (00:15):

Today we're going to do something a little bit different on the podcast. It's just going to be me, me, me, and only me. Actually, no it's not. It is just me. But I'm here representing all of my colleagues at Utility Safety Partners. I'm here representing all of the agents who respond to LOCATE requests, the administration, the team leaders, the managers, the directors, my board members, and of course all of the people who work on our volunteer committees. And of course I'm representing you, our listeners and the people who rely on our services to dig safely to protect public worker and community safety. I'm going to give you a bit of an update for what's coming up in 2023 and also talk about what we did in 2022.

(00:58):

Welcome back to series 2023 of The Safety Moment podcast. Nice to be back. It's nice to be back after a bit of a break, although I did enjoy it. I have to admit it was nice to have the break with family and friends, but then you come rearing back in January and guess what? The calendar keeps flying past you and you got to keep moving with it. So here we are with our podcast series Restarting in 2023 and nice to be back. As I was just saying, what we're going to do today, I want to talk about our year that we just had 2022 and what we did, what accomplished, what you accomplished as the users of our system and where we're going this year in 2023. 2022 was the year that many of us saw the beginning of the end of pandemic, which was a welcome moment for so many of us.

(01:57):

We started getting back together with family and friends again. We started doing things again. The masks came off at the hockey games and the major gatherings. Concerts happened again, festivals happened again, and yet when we look at the data for the Alberta Covid stats for example, they just keep the numbers keep going down and that's a good thing. So I think although I'm no doctor, I think we are past the major part of the global pandemic and that's a good thing. It allows us to get back to doing what we need to do as a society

(02:40):

With respect to Utility Safety Partners, the pandemic, when it began in March, 2020, it had a major effect on our services and on our operations. We left our office, we had to transition immediately to a remote working situation and yet shortly after a bit of a lull in early 2020, the system was taxed and perhaps more than it has been in recent memory. And what that looked like was from working from home, it put a lot of effort and a lot of pressure on our team leaders, on our staff, our administration, and they responded admirably so well. I'm very proud of the team. So much so that 2020 was the busiest year we've ever had in terms of receiving and responding to locate requests, and we did it all from home. Now moving forward, we really haven't been back. We go to the office from time to time, but we haven't been back and that's because we've proven that we don't need to be in the office to manage the system and to manage the damage prevention process.

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For example, in 2022, we finished the year just shy of 460,000 locate requests in Alberta. That's the second highest in the last 10 years, and we did it with an amazing, almost 88% of those locate requests came through the web. That's amazing. So not only are we seeing the almost the highest number of

locate requests ever in our history, we're also seeing the highest ever web percentage, meaning the system is working, the web percentage, the people going to click before you dig as opposed to call clicks versus calls is working. Homeowners, almost 50% of all locate requests from homeowners are online and homeowners will dig maybe once every 10 years, once in a lifetime and they're getting it. Contractors and members, however, those are utility safety partner members, their locate requests are 98.5% online and when you consider how many times contractors are using our system, which is the vast majority, that is extremely high and they're doing it because it works, they're doing it because it's convenient.

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Now, for those who do need to request a locate by phone, obviously we're still doing that, but it's a diminishing part of our business. Less than 12% of all those locate requests, those 400 and almost 60,000 locate requests came in over the phone, but the average speed of answer for the year was just a minute and 21 seconds. The average queue callback was eight minutes and 43 seconds. Now what is queue callback? That's when you call in and you have the option of selecting a queue callback, meaning the system will call you back, you can hang up, the system will call you back. When your place in line is now coming up to speak with an agent, you don't lose your place in line and you just select that option. Now, the average wait time for that over the year was minutes and 43 seconds and the average queue wait time, so this is the amount of time a person is waiting to speak to an agent if they're not taking queue callback was a minute and 11 seconds.

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So we are meeting our targets and we're providing services to Albertans how they wish to use the system, whether it's online or by a phone call. Looking ahead in 2023, we expect a similar year operationally with additional locate requests continuing to migrate to the web. Again, it's the homeowners that that's the demographic that we're looking at now that will continue to increase and they're doing that by about five to 10% every year. For example, in 2021 I think we are around 44% of all locate requests. Were online from homeowners and this year is getting close to 50. We'll probably start inching up to 52 and 53. Maybe in a couple of years we'll get to 65, but that's just going to take time because those are it. It's really the younger generation that's really more familiar with being online. You and I will order a pizza by calling, but our kids will order a pizza through an app and that's what they're expecting that our system will do.

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The challenge we continue to have is that when the digging season begins in earnest and that is in the month of May, it's like flipping on a light switch. When that happens, we experience a flood of locate requests every Monday between 8:00 AM and roughly 11:00 AM and then there's a bit of a lull, and then again, that switch hits on and we have another flood mid-afternoon, but by Tuesday afternoon, maybe Wednesday morning, it gets really quiet and it continues that way throughout the week except in the month of May. In the month of May, we will receive as many as 60,000 locate requests in a month. Now when you look at December we had maybe 1200 of the entire month, so that's when the digging season begins, and that's if you're experiencing long wait times, it's going to be then if you have to make a locate request and you have to call in, try calling on a Wednesday or Thursday or Friday because I mean if you're calling Monday, let's face it, you knew you were going to be digging on the week before you knew you were going to be digging soon, so why not just schedule yourselves to call on a Thursday or Friday and you won't have to wait as long as you would on a Monday upcoming year.

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We've got some lots of stuff going on and it's not just from the contact centre. From the education awareness side we have we're back to having our conference and we're really glad when we unified services with the Alberta Common Ground Alliance and the wars align campaign. A couple of years ago, we promised to bring back the safety conference that the Alberta Common Ground Alliance was hosting every year and this year, finally, with the pandemic in the rear view mirror March 28th and 29th in Red Deer, we will have the Utility Safety Conference. Day one will be the conference, and day two will be ground disturbance training, and then after that just safe month kicks off and April 1st we'll have our two new ambassadors, safety ambassadors hitting the road in Grand Prairie and in Red Deer. We'll also have a new safety ambassador in Calgary In terms of education awareness, that's also the time when our radio advertising campaign begins and we'll almost be starting our corporate sponsorships.

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You may have seen us with the Okotoks Dawgs. We're actually promoting with the Okotoks Oilers as well this winter, and I'm really proud to say we're we have a relationship that we are kicking off again, no pun intended, with a Canadian Football Hall of Fame which provides us with a number of appearances of the Grey Cup and one of the Keepers of the Cup, Mr. Jeff McWhinney. Those events we're going to be planning in concert with, for example, the Safety Conference in end of March in terms of social media, we continue to work in that space. We continue to post our daily safety moment, which I know many of our members are going to when they have their own tailgate meetings and using our daily safety moments as their safety moment to kick off their tailgate meeting. And then we have something we tried differently this year, a little something new with the gamers.

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Now I'll call it the gamers, but it's maybe not the best title, but we had advertising that was jettisoned into various online or smartphone game gaming apps where in a break in the game you would see our ad click. Before you dig, I can remember my wife on one day, she was playing Words with Friends I think it was, and she says, Hey, check this out. Look at this. And it was click before you dig an ad for click before you dig. We're going to be doing more of that this year and it's going to be a busy year for education awareness best practices. We continue to work on the best practice manual, the damage prevention process in Alberta and contribute to the national best practices that are managed by the Canadian Common Ground Alliance, the damage prevention process in Alberta.

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The update for that will be completed in March and rolled out with the safety conference at the end of March training standards. That committee continues its hard work and the anticipated release of the locating and marking standard will happen this year as well. This is something that we've been working on for over a year now, and we firmly believe that it will have a considerable positive impact on damage prevention in Alberta and for example, what it will do, it will facilitate and enable a retail model for locating and marking under current operations. When we notify a utility owner of an excavation, proposed excavation, they will triage that to determine whether or not a locate is required, and when one is required, they will dispatch a locator to locate and mark that site before the excavation occurs. Now, when we have what I will call the buried the the shallow utilities such as Enmax, Telus EPCOR, ATCO Gas the city of Calgary, city of Edmonton, when those utilities, they're all usually in a very tight area, they have created a LOCATE consortium that releases or dispatches one locator to identify and mark all those buried utilities that has, well, it makes a hell of a lot of sense.

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Those resources have been tapped routinely year over year over year, and what we're working on now is a retail model whereby the digging community can choose to secure a locator from a qualified pool of

locators and they can simply pay for that locate. Now it simply, it's added to the cost of doing business and it assures a locate in a timely manner and which is not subject unfortunately to perhaps delays by going the traditional model, the traditional route. We believe it's going to be a game changer in safety and reduce costs for the digging community, particularly

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March 28 and 29 mark your calendar. We will be at the Cambridge Hotel in Red Deer, Alberta for the 2023 Utility Safety Conference. This is the first time we're back in a number of years. You'll hear an update on the state of the unification from the chair of the USP Board. You'll have updates from the committee meetings concurrent education and awareness sessions, a captivating keynote address from address, a captivating keynote address from Chad Kennedy. There'll be a trade show and Jeff McWhinney and the CFL's Grey Cup will be in attendance. If you haven't met Jeff, you're going to enjoy him. He's one of the keepers of the Grey Cup and he is a wealth of knowledge and one of our damage prevention ambassadors over the years. If you're looking for the agenda, you can go to utility.safety.ca, click on events and you can find everything you're looking for right there. Hope to see you there in Red Deer

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Legislation. This has been a long, long road and it has some linkages with the training standards and particularly that retail model for locating. In 2022, we drafted legislation for damage prevention legislation for Alberta that quite simply would require all buried utility owners and owners of overhead energy and utility assets to register the location of those assets with utility safety partners and to respond to a locate request when one is made prior to a ground disturbance and responding may mean to locate and mark within a certain amount of time or provide an all clear and for the system to a smart system to provide to the excavator when they are working in the vicinity of an overhead energy or utility asset and to stay seven meters safe. Now, the legislation was drafted. We released it for comment. We had two rounds of comment and then we had correspondence that was very timely and certainly appreciated from the Alberta Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association.

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We released the legislation, draft legislation twice online and we had received public comments. We modified it accordingly and provided feedback publicly when the legislation was modified in accordance to those comments and where it wasn't and if it wasn't, why we didn't modify it. And it was around that time when I received correspondence. It was timely and certainly appreciated from the Alberta Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association requesting that a bilateral working group be assembled between utility safety partners and the road builders to look at the legislation and to identify any areas that we had to look at more closely. The road builders use our services a lot. They are one of our primary users. Their feedback was absolutely essential, and they are also a very powerful organization. Now, the road builder said that if we could collaborate on this and button down the legislation that it made sense for us and for them and for everybody else that they would support it when we provided it to the Alberta government.

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And we've gotten, we are so close to doing that. We had a meeting again yesterday and we've really done a lot of work and I'm very proud of the work that we've done and of the relationship building that has occurred as well. So where will legislation go while the track now to deliver legislation or anything with the Alberta government is getting very short. The election is coming, but that doesn't mean that we won't do something. We won't do anything there is we, we've established a very good relationship with the minister that and the parliamentary secretary that are working on this with us. And regardless of

what the outcome of the next election is, that work has got to continue. This is really a nonpartisan issue. It's public safety. It's providing the integrity of breed utilities that provides services to our way of life and really the economic backbone for the province of Alberta.

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So it makes sense that we continue down this path and we're, we have a strong committee, legislation committee and we have a strong legislation contractor working with us with Concentric public affairs guiding us through this process. So there's definitely a lot of work going on here. Coming up in 2023. It's going to be an exciting year. That's going to be one that's going to have highs and lows like every other year, but I want to thank all of the users of our system who take the time to request, to locate and to do the right thing. There's really what it comes down to. Unfortunately, the law in Alberta is somewhat limited. Occupational health and safety says you must identify a buried utilities before you excavate, but it doesn't tell you how. It doesn't you that you should do so through Utility Safety partners, whereas the Alberta Energy regulator legislation does, and whereas the Canada Energy Regulator Damage Prevention regulations also says you contact the notification center or the one call center for that province, we're the right path to do that and we've been around for 40 years almost, and we do it a good job.

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We are renowned around the globe for the work that we do, and I'm proud of being part of that, but I'm proud of the people that use our system too and recognize that this is a simple, simple process to protect public worker and community safety and protect the integrity of the breed infrastructure that provides our services for the way of life we have. That's going to wrap things up on the podcast. I want to start again. That's going to wrap things up on the podcast. I want to thank our producers stories and strategies, and I hope you choose to follow this podcast on any directory you're listening on. And please do leave a rating. It helps. You can follow us on Twitter at Utility underscore Safety, and we're also on Instagram and Facebook and we're thinking about TikTok. If you'd like to send us a note, maybe have an episode idea, please email us at info@utilitysafety.ca and put Podcast in the subject header. One click costs you nothing, not clicking could cost you everything.