

Intro ([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 ([00:17](#)):

I have a special guest today, more special than most of my guests have ever been. Today I get to speak to one of our frontline agents, Chelsea Barnit. Now Chelsea has been with Utility Safety Partners, Alberta OneCall for six years, and she's one of our frontline agents, our Damage Prevention Associates. And Chelsea is going to talk to us today. Talk with me today about homeowners and what it's like for them to request a locate not only online, but by phone. And as we get into the 2024 digging season, this is probably one of the most timely podcasts and one of my favorites to do when I get to speak with one of my own colleagues. Chelsea, thanks for joining me this morning. This is a really unique opportunity for me. I get to speak with one of our frontline people and to talk about really the damage prevention process and how we roll this out with homeowners and how they interact with our system. And you see it from all angles. I mean, about 50% of homeowners today, they do their locate requests online, and then 50% they call in, which is totally fine. But before we get there, before we get there, I want to know a little bit about you now. Chelsea, how long have you been with Utility Safety Partners and what's your role?

Chelsea Barnowich ([01:32](#)):

Well, thanks for having me, Mike. I am a damage prevention associate at Utility Safety Partners, and this is my sixth season that I'm headed into here.

Mike Sullivan ([01:43](#)):

Excellent. So you've seen all, you've had all kinds of experience already as a damage prevention associate, A DPA, as we say in the biz, and you've probably seen all kinds of things or have learned all kinds of things. Now, an agent going back before your time with Utility Safety Partners or Alberta One Call because you were there for that transition, right? Yes. An agent going back 10 years ago and what they did then and what an agent does today is so different. So what is the most part of your day? I mean, yes, you are responding to locate requests by phone, but what else are you doing?

Chelsea Barnowich ([02:22](#)):

Well, that probably is the majority of the days is taking requests over the phone. We do chat also, and some of us also do email support. And then I worked over the winter, so sometimes we do some help with troubleshooting with the team leaders coming up with ideas for podcasts,

Mike Sullivan ([02:41](#)):

Which was a great idea by the way. Yeah,

Chelsea Barnowich ([02:44](#)):

Thank you. And yeah, that's kind of it. I mean, for the most part we are just frontline facing agents and we do just take phone calls for the most part.

Mike Sullivan ([02:53](#)):

But you mentioned chat, you mentioned email support. I mean, chat was not something that we were doing a lot of until maybe five years ago or so. And so if you are doing chat or if an agent is doing chat, how many chat sessions are you managing at once potentially?

Chelsea Barnowich ([03:09](#)):

It varies. I think we're actually capped out that agents can only handle five chats at once. I believe it

Mike Sullivan ([03:14](#)):

Is. Which is a lot.

Chelsea Barnowich ([03:15](#)):

It can be, yes, it can get a little hectic. Usually you'll have two or three on the go and for whatever reason, people seem to sense when other people are starting chats and you'll get three all at once and then have nothing for 20 minutes. But yeah, we do help multiple

Mike Sullivan ([03:30](#)):

People at once. There are peaks and valleys right to the week. I mean, on Monday morning, for example, during the digging season, I've been doing this in this role for almost 13 years. And Monday mornings in the contact center it can be mayhem. Even though most of our locate requests are online today, Monday morning, it seems everybody waits till Monday to put their locate request in when they could have done so on Friday when it was dead quiet. Is that still the case even though most things are online today?

Chelsea Barnowich ([04:05](#)):

Oh, definitely. And I suspect that's because people sit around and chat on the weekend with their significant others or they make their plans and then they're like, oh, what's the first thing we have to do? Yes, exactly, honey, you need to build me a fence and a garden bed. And he says, well, what's the first thing I have to do? I should get my locates done. So they do call on Monday morning. And the other strange thing that people do is the weather really impacts our volumes too.

Mike Sullivan ([04:30](#)):

What? That hasn't changed, but even though, I mean the vast majority of our locate requests mean contractors and our members are predominantly online, like 98% or something like that, even though that's the case. Yeah, Monday mornings and then it goes down a little bit and by Wednesday afternoon it's getting really manageable and Thursday, Friday is pretty quiet. It's just doesn't change well. So if you're out there listening to the podcast here and you're wondering why it's taking a little bit longer to respond to a locate request by phone on a Monday, feel free to call Friday or Thursday or even Wednesday afternoon. Pretty quiet. And that's just seems to be the way of the world. But anyway, but you sent me an email a few weeks ago and I was really happy to get it. And you said, Mike, I was reading the newsletter this morning. I thought to myself, wouldn't it be fun to do a homeowner edition of the podcast? Did you think you're going to get the response you did? Hey, great idea. Let's do that. And it was going to be you.

Chelsea Barnowich ([05:26](#)):

I thought maybe you would be like, sure, that's a great idea. Did I think I would be sitting here doing the podcast? No, definitely not. No, it

Mike Sullivan ([05:33](#)):

Was a good idea. And you're right on target. You're right on time. This is just on the edge of the digging season about to begin. And this is when we really see a homeowners, and let's face it, homeowners, they dig what, once every five, 10 years? Maybe once in a lifetime.

Chelsea Barnowich ([05:54](#)):

A lot of them, some of them are yearly.

Mike Sullivan ([05:57](#)):

Well, that's almost like a homeowner contractor. They're really busy and they can't wait to get out there. I know my wife's like that. She can't wait to get out there and start working in the yard, but most of the people out there, they are once every five, 10 years. And again, maybe once in a lifetime. And if they're going to go online, it can be daunting, I guess, because wow, I have to put all this information in and yet 50% of 'em do go online and do it that way. What are you hearing from a landowner or a homeowner I should say, who is calling in for locate requests? Are they all business, okay, here's my name, here's where I'm digging. Or do they give you a little bit of a narrative, I want to do this or I want to do that? Can you help me through how does it work?

Chelsea Barnowich ([06:41](#)):

You kind of get a mix actually. So you get the people who call in and they're roaring ready to go and presenting the information to you and have an idea of what they're calling about. And then you get a lot of people who call in for the first time and they say, I have no idea who you are, what I'm calling for. My contractor asked me to call you and get a request, so could you tell me how to do this? And luckily for them, we are well trained to walk people through that process and kind of explain what's going on and what will happen with the request. But yeah, you kind of get a variety of people. Some people are really up to speed on what to do, or they work in the construction industry and they're just calling as a homeowner, but, and then you get the people who've just never called before and have no idea.

Mike Sullivan ([07:27](#)):

So what are some of the common questions you get are what are the most common types of homeowner? Here I am making air quotes, everybody can't see me. What are some of the most common questions you get or common projects you're getting from homeowners?

Chelsea Barnowich ([07:42](#)):

The most common projects for homeowners is probably fencing. Fencing decks is, I would guess probably our most common ones. I'm also going to lump farmers in with homeowners, we get a lot of farmer phone calls, so lots of fencing for them, dugouts for them. And their most common questions usually are things like, what are the flag colors? What do they mean? What do the markings actually mean once they're on the ground, how do I work around those if I need to, if I have questions, who do I call? What does the process look like? Just basically what is this?

Mike Sullivan ([08:18](#)):

Yeah, basically folks who aren't exposed to the damage prevention process, I mean for us, we live it and we see it every day. We work with it every day. The digging community, they see it every day. They're so tuned in. Yeah, yellow flag means this red flag means that how many locators are going to come out and do this? That type of thing. So that would be the things we take for granted, I guess. And that's what they're curious about. Interesting. Now, when you do a chat session, for example, and it could be a homeowner obviously, or it could be a next week, it could be somebody from the digging. When you're managing chat, what are some of the things, basically somebody's on chat because they're stuck. So what are some of the common areas where people get stuck

Chelsea Barnowich ([09:08](#)):

For homeowners? The biggest one is our mapping screen is a little bit, I think just if you're not used to working in a system for mapping, it can be a little bit confusing the first time. Luckily, as you know, we just launched our next gen site and I spent a bit of time last night. I tried to go into the mentality of how would I feel if I was looking at this for the first time. And luckily I just got a brand new Android phone and I have no idea how it works. So I was kind of in that situation of I don't know how this is going to look. And it is a little overwhelming if you don't know what you're supposed to do when this map comes up. And some people think that because it's found your address with a little target on the screen that you should be able to go to the next step. But we actually want people to tell us, where on your property are you digging? And to draw a little mapped area, and that's usually where people get stuck.

Mike Sullivan ([10:01](#)):

I know one of my friends, he is not the most tech savvy guy, but he was commenting to me one day, and this is before we launched next, maybe last summer, he said, Hey, Mike, I went to the USP's website and I did a locate request and I actually did it on my phone. Wow. Is that ever easy? Well, it's good to hear, right? That's really good to hear. And I said, you didn't need help from your daughter? Actually, not this time. I didn't need help. So I was really proud of himself and oh, this is good, because again, not the most tech savvy guy, but he was able to do it. And yet if you do get stuck and you don't have your 12-year-old kid next to you or something like that, that can walk you through, click here or whatever, then we do have that option.

([10:45](#)):

You click the chat function and somebody will come up and help you. I see the reports of our chats and this the aggregate, and we are always very high, 95% and higher. And typically, let's face it, unless somebody has something bad to say, they're not going to say anything because the experience is good. And so I'm really proud of yourself and all the other agents who work with us that the feedback is always very good. And for chats. And it shows here, you've been here six years, you've seen a lot, you've experienced a lot, but just, okay, you probably get an idea as soon as the chat begins where this is going, right?

Chelsea Barnowich ([11:32](#)):

Yes, generally, and there's a few key questions that we can ask people because it's obviously really hard to know where somebody is stuck and what exactly they're stuck on when you can't see it. So you get really good at asking very particular but strange questions that people might perceive as, why are they asking me this? It's because we're trying to establish what tool are you using that could be wrong or which part of that process are you getting stuck on? And the great thing is people can send us screenshots on chat, which is super helpful.

Mike Sullivan ([12:02](#)):

Oh, that is, yeah. I never thought of that. That's true. It's interesting. I mean, we process just for Alberta, we process about half a million locate requests every year and every year out of those half million. And it's a lot. I think it's a big number when you think of it, when you have, I might get one, maybe two, but usually it's no more than one a feedback from somebody. And it could be one of our team leaders or agents or operations director saying, okay, we have somebody who used our system who was really upset and they have a beef or whatever, and I get it. They may be frustrated. There may be something else going on that is causing the frustration or exacerbating their frustration. Have you ever had to deal with anybody online, a homeowner, somebody who was just really frustrated, and how do you diffuse that? How do you walk them through that in six years? You must have

Chelsea Barnowich ([13:02](#)):

Oh, definitely. And that's understandable. Sometimes people have been planning for a year or to do a project and for whatever reason, either they can't get their locates completed or they're not getting responses from our members, unfortunately, and they're frustrated. So on chat especially, obviously troubleshooting just what are you doing wrong? Because ultimately, like you said, our system is fairly simple. Most people should be able to find their way through it. So just providing them with the help that they need and establishing, well, where are you having the issue? And usually it's like a two second, oh, just quickly switch this setting or make sure that you're clicking this over here. And I think just feeling like they're being helped is what will help people calm down a little bit. And worse comes to worse if we can't help them on chat, if they're just getting more and more frustrated, our contact center is here and we just give the phone number and we say, Hey, give my coworker a call. There's no sense in you getting so upset that you're going to have a health event or something here. You might as well just call. We want you to be safe. We want you to get your request in, so just phone us and we'll do it for you.

Mike Sullivan ([14:10](#)):

And that's the key thing right there is it's not just one person. You have a team of people that are there for support, and whether it's your team leader or the contact center manager or even up to me, I mean, we're all there to help support each other. And this is one of the core functions as a frontline agent. I mean it, you're that interface, you're that person. That's not easy. That's not easy, and you can't take it for granted. And you have to really, you're wearing that integrity of the organization as you're reaching out to people and they contact us, whether it's on chat or on the phone. So one of the things that has got to be a challenge, and you mentioned it and you reached out to me, was the lifespan of a locate. So somebody submits a locate request and they have the flags go out. You mentioned that that is often a common question. What are they saying? What are they asking?

Chelsea Barnowich ([15:09](#)):

So I don't know if it's so much of a question as people don't understand the flagging and how important the flagging is and how important the flagging is that it's intact and that where your markings are. Some people think, well, the lines don't move after 14 days, so why do you have to remark them after 14 days? And that's actually something that our members are the ones who decide this. So the utility companies? Yes, exactly. So usually if you haven't begun your work within 14 days, we would ask for you to request a relocate requests because that's what our utility members have dictated to us. If you do begin your work within those 14 days, it usually extends to be 30 days. And my understanding behind that is that they've assumed that you've gone out and examined where your markings are and are aware

of where everything should be. So then they're good for the 30 days. And even the 30 days, a lot of homeowners are like, still, after 30 days, my lines are not going to move. You're right.

Mike Sullivan ([16:11](#)):

And yet there are things they can do that would maintain those markings for almost indefinitely if they meet certain conditions. Those markings can be good almost indefinitely, but I think that's where it becomes a little bit challenging. You have to be able to control the site. And let's face it, if it's on your front lawn and there's neighborhood kids, I mean those flags can disappear.

Chelsea Barnowich ([16:36](#)):

They grow legs.

Mike Sullivan ([16:37](#)):

Yep, they do. They grow eggs. Or if it's an agricultural area, I mean, you're probably not using pin flags because cattle tend to chew on those and disappear, but there are, if you can control the site, then yeah, that site could be, I wouldn't say in perpetuity, but technically language wise, yeah, it could be. But you mentioned also that homeowners saying, well, I took a photo of the flags. I know where everything is. And you hear that all the time. What are you telling people when you hear that?

Chelsea Barnowich ([17:12](#)):

Well, basically photos aren't as, I guess solid as we might think they are. For example, if you reference points, right? Yeah. If you took a picture in front of, say, a little shrub that you had planted that year and in five years you go back to this photo of your gas line, so your yellow paint and your yellow flags and your bush has grown to be six feet wide, suddenly your reference point that you were probably using is completely different. And at that point you're just guessing.

Mike Sullivan ([17:44](#)):

Yeah, you are. Exactly. Exactly. Now here you are, you're person, have you or your family or any of your friends use our service?

Chelsea Barnowich ([17:55](#)):

Yes, actually, my uncle was actually a MD worker for the county of Foothills, and he did all of his locate requests with us for years. My brother has used it, I've used it. I don't know if my dad ever has, but my uncle and my brother have

Mike Sullivan ([18:10](#)):

Good. And I gather their experience has been good.

Chelsea Barnowich ([18:13](#)):

Yes. My uncle especially, he retired now, and so he wasn't a young man when he started using our system, but he loved doing them online. He didn't want to have to call in. He really enjoyed the online system.

Mike Sullivan ([18:27](#)):

I think it's a paradigm shift, right? It's kind of like the pandemic. I mean, by the way, today is March 15th. We're recording this March 15th. I just realized that it was four years ago today. We sent everybody home four years ago today, and here we are four years later and we're still working from remotely and we no longer have an office. But anyway, that's kind of an anecdotal thing, but to be able to go online and do this, and it's a paradigm shift just like going to a remote work place, it's a paradigm shift. We could have done it years before, but nothing pushed us to do it. When we first began to promote click, before you dig predominantly, it was an effort to let the public know you have an option, you can go, you can use the phone, you can use the web. And it did shift calls to clicks.

[\(19:25\)](#):

We saw that, and it was really just to give people that option. And the way of the world was going there anyway. I mean, you could order food online, you could buy clothing online, you could get to your airfare, your hotels, anything wanted tickets for anything online. That's where things were going. We had to move with it. And it wasn't until a little while later that I had a hunch and I said, I have a hunch that locate requests online are less likely to result in damages. And it was Joseph Rosenberg. I said, Joe, can you somehow verify this? And he did. And the analysis was accurate to my hunch that it was very not just a little bit significantly less likely to have damage if you had a locate request online. And the simple idea was nobody knows better where they're digging than the person digging.

[\(20:17\)](#):

And the Pelican Corp system One call access allows a person to put in their locate request and identify precisely where they're digging. And so here we are all this time later, and yeah, we see about 50% of homeowners are online and they can call as well. But it's interesting that when I hear you say that, my uncle who was maybe a little older, maybe looks a little bit like me, that he was able to go online and do this and liked it. But there were others when we mandated that the digging community and our members had to go online because of this analysis that we had, it was a best practice. We determined our objective is to reduce or eliminate damages. And if we find a method that does so then we have to do that. We have to employ it. And when we did, so there was some holdout would say, I'm not doing that online. I don't want to go online. And yet now we're at 97, 90 8%, right?

Chelsea Barnowich [\(21:16\)](#):

I think it was 99% on shares last report. Actually

Mike Sullivan [\(21:19\)](#):

It could. Yes, you're probably right. And the only reason why it's not a hundred percent is because emergencies have to be called in April. Is Dig Safe or Safe Digging Month across Canada and across United States. And to mark that Utility Safety Partners is embarking on a series of contractor breakfasts. If you'd like to know where there's one in your area, please go to our website utility.safety.ca. So if you have an emergency and you're the agent responding to an emergency, and I know this is probably not a homeowner type thing, but what's that? Because the frontline person

Chelsea Barnowich [\(21:59\)](#):

For sure, and we do get unfortunate homeowners whose water sewer lines blow up on them and they have to fix those. So our first kind of thing we do is triage people and establish whether or not it is an emergency and it is something that is an immediate threat to life health or property occurring is what we're trying to find out. So is somebody going to die, get hurt? Is your property going to flood? Are you going to get sewage backup? That kind of thing. And then once they've established that, we find out

when they're planning on getting somebody out to repair the issue, and then we'll process their ticket, ask them the five Ws, the who, what, where, when, why, and who's going to be on site to meet with our locators. That is one of the big differences between a routine locate request and an emergency is we absolutely need to have somebody on site prepared to speak to the locator about the emergency that is occurring. And people have to tell us what time they will be available for that. And it's a 24 hour service, obviously, because emergencies, so we will work around them kind of thing. But that's one of the bigger differences there. And then our locators are given a two hour window to arrive on site and complete the locate request for the customer.

Mike Sullivan ([23:15](#)):

See, you have all that in your head. You had nothing even to look at it all there. I mean, after six years of doing this, it's this old hat to you. I remember I was one of those homeowners a number of years ago, maybe five years ago. We were at the old office and my wife called me, she says, our basement's full of water and the water line that feeds water to our house had ruptured. And basically it came in and they had to replace the water line. It was a big, big ugly mess for a number of months. They had to tear apart an entire basement. Anyway, when the excavator arrived and I said, the city shut off the water to my home, and the gentleman arrived and he had done this kind of work before, and I said, are you putting a locate requester in or I, and he said, well, I can do it. I said, well, I need to see it. And he said, well, don't worry, I'll do it. I said, no, you don't understand. Here's what I do for a living. And he goes

([24:16](#)):

This is really important

([24:17](#)):

I said, there's no shovel's going to touch that ground until I see this ticket. And to his credit, he says, no problem. He says, Mike, I'm not going to do anything differently here because I do this all the time. And I was really glad to hear that. I mean, that's a deep excavation they have to do. They had a trench box in there and everything else. And I was glad to see that they met all the safety requirements. But that was put as a homeowner and as my job, I mean as a homeowner, they'll put me at ease. And because you're in a situation that is quite dire, you have property damage, you have, it is quite an upset. And to know that as a homeowner, okay, that's one last thing I got to worry about. And you have a diligent contractor that's doing this, and that's not always the case, right?

Chelsea Barnowich ([25:07](#)):

It's not always the case. That's something I think about too. If I personally was hiring a contractor to do a job for me, I wouldn't insist that they put in their own locate requests or I would probably get a different contractor personally.

Mike Sullivan ([25:24](#)):

And because this is where you get into the legalities of things, but we can't really tell people what to do. But my preference is that the contractor does it. They're digging that hole. That hole belongs to them. And even though it's on my property, but that hole belongs to them and I'm paying them for it, therefore they should do it.

Chelsea Barnowich ([25:43](#)):

Exactly right. And the other thing is, if I had a contractor who was resistant to a request to do something safely, I would probably move on question that. Yes. And honestly, our locate requests are so quick and

easy to put in. And once contractors have done two or three of them online, I can probably put them through in a minute each kind of thing. And if you set up your account properly, 30 seconds, honestly. So there's no reason to me that contractors shouldn't be doing that for their homeowners. And like you said, there are some legalities around that too, about whose name is on the paperwork and if something does happen, who's responsible for that.

Mike Sullivan ([26:31](#)):

It brings me to another point I wanted to bring up and talk about is you've been with us for six years and you've seen changes, obviously. I mean, the name change is a big one. The pandemic another one, huge one. But also what we've changed a little bit more the last couple of years is as an agent and for the locate requests come in by phone, there's the average speed events. We look at how much time an agent is taking on the phone. And we've tried to push that, try to push back on that a little bit. We want the agents to spend necessary time to educate and inform as well. What's that? Do you feel that reducing some pressure as an agent from that push, push, push to get to the next call,

Chelsea Barnowich ([27:22](#)):

Especially in the last year or so? Yes, and I think part of that is the demographics of who is phoning us has drastically changed. I'm a millennial. I don't want to talk to you on the phone. I would rather go online. So that's usually the method that I would choose. Whereas the people that usually are calling us now in the spring is elderly people who don't have smartphones, they don't have computers. They wouldn't know how to navigate to our website. So elderly people tend to take a little bit longer on the phone to just explaining things or they can't hear well. So we almost needed a little bit more time just because our demographics have changed like that. Generally speaking though, most people, if they just give us straight shot answers to our questions, we can have you on and off the phone within five minutes kind of thing. Sometimes people take 10 to 15 minutes if they have lots of questions. What do the flags mean? Who's going to come? How do I know that everything's marked? Who's going to mark my private lines? Some people ask every question in the book, some people just take their ticket number and go on with their day. They answer yes, no, yes, no, all through the questions, and they're happy just to go read the documentation that gets emailed out.

Mike Sullivan ([28:34](#)):

Well, I'm glad that we give that because it wasn't always a case they had to move on, move on, move on to the next call. And the performance factors for the agent were really designed to eliminate that backlog of calls, but now we don't. The number of calls we have per month is dramatically lower than it used to be because more people going online and those calls in also include people asking for information or whatever the case may be. But I'm glad that we're able to shift that and spend more time with people who need it. And yes, they might not dig again for five years or whatever the case may be, but now they know the answer. And then maybe in coffee talk somewhere else, they're going to tell their friends about, well, here's what those flags mean and did you know this? And if we're the stewards of that information, we're the stewards of the damage prevention process.

([29:31](#)):

But you're the voice, right? You're the voice for that person. And that's critical. And I sincerely appreciate what you do and what your colleagues do. The other DPAs, because it's not easy. It's not easy. I mean, the few times that I have to every year deal with somebody who's had a bad experience or who maybe just kind of get up on the wrong side of the bed that day and had a bad experience, it can be challenging. And you could be facing that with every call. And yet you go to the next one, you go to the

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next one, you go to the next one. So hat's off to you for doing that. Oh, thank you. Thanks for doing this, and thanks for sending an email to me and saying, Hey, Mike, I got an idea this. It's been a lot of fun for me to chat with you and Chelsea, you're a great ambassador to Utility Safety Partners, and you're a great ambassador to your colleagues, the agents, the associates who do what you do every day. So thank you for doing this. I sincerely appreciate it.

Speaker 4 ([30:35](#)):

Well, thank you for having me.

Mike Sullivan ([30:41](#)):

That's going to wrap things up on the Safety Moment podcast. I want to thank our producers stories and strategies, and I hope you follow this podcast on any director you're listening on. And please do leave a rating when you do so. You can follow us on Twitter at Utility Safety, and we're also on Instagram and Facebook. If you'd like to send us a note, maybe you have an idea for an episode, email us at info@utilitysafety.ca and put podcast in the subject header. I'm Mike Sullivan, president of Utility Safety Partners. Thank you for listening. And remember, one click costs you nothing. Not clicking could cost you everything.