

Mike Sullivan ([00:00](#)):

Welcome everybody to the podcast. We're doing something a little bit different today. My guest, well, it is me and in a sense, but I do have our producer with us today, Doug Downs, and he's going to be, well, we're going to have a conversation about something that a bit of a landmark, I guess today is a landmark D, and I'll get to that a little bit later. But I want to tell you the story about Canada's dance with 8 1 1 or three digit dialing. And it's a story that really, it's almost a decade old, if not older now actually, that not a lot of people are aware of or are familiar with. And the eight one brand in the United States is a juggernaut. And we don't have that. We don't use 8 1 1 here, but

Doug Downs ([00:48](#)):

We almost did.

Mike Sullivan ([00:50](#)):

We almost did. Exactly. We almost did. Well, we really wanted to put it that way, but at the end of the day, we just couldn't do it. So that's what we're going to talk about today is Canada's foray into three digit dialing for call before you dig. Music

Doug Downs ([01:05](#)):

Starts there. So we almost joined the Americans with 8 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([01:22](#)):

Well, we wanted to really did, and I'm going to go back here, God, I think it was about 2008 if I'm not mistaken, when the Common Ground Alliance in the us, they secured 8 1 1. So the big thing was N one one dialing, and there's a limited number of numbers you can do. I mean, there's 2-1-1, 3-1-1, et cetera, all the way to 9 1 1. And they'd all been allocated. Now, 8 1 1 came available and the Common Ground Alliance at the time, which was led by their president, Bob kipp, they were able to secure 8 1 1 as the three digit dialing for call before you dig. Now, it was revolutionary. It really was because every province in every state now, every state in the US had its own one 800 number. And let's face it, who remembers all those numbers, right? One, 800 something, something, something. No way. Exactly. So now we have this 8 1 1, which was really, it was something else.

([02:24](#)):

And then the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association, most of their, if not all of their members at the time, they transport product into the United States, and they were able to use that 8 1 1 N one one dialing code to promote awareness for call before you dig. And at the time, this was probably around a transition period in my career that I was working for Alliance Pipeline, and then I was working with HMA Land Services, but I was still connected with the Canadian Common Ground Alliance at the time. And the C-C-G-A-E really wasn't a fame yet. It was an idea, it was a committee. It really wasn't a full fledged organization. And somehow, and if somebody was to ask me, well, how did you get involved with this 8 1 1 in Canada? I couldn't even tell you. I honestly, I don't know how I found myself in the middle of this, but I did.

([03:28](#)):

And it became a project that the Canadian Common Ground Alliance, the CCGA, all of a sudden was steering and we were going to get or do our damndest to get 8 1 1 for Canada. And so here I am, I just, I'm referred to as a project manager at the time, and we tried to figure out how we were going to do this. And working with cpa, the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association and the Canadian Gas Association,

those two organizations were really pushing the CCGA to get this done. We determined that we needed to hire a lawyer, a lawyer that could help us submit an application to the CRTC for this 8 1 1 dialing code. And in the midst of all this where we are, okay, how are we going to do this? We need to raise funds. We learned that 8 1 1 back in about 2007 had already been allocated in Canada for telehealth except nobody was using it.

[\(04:44\)](#):

So here we are. I mean, we're now 2013 or 2012 or something like that. A good four or five years after that. It's already been allocated, but nobody is using 8 1 1 for telehealth. So unbeknownst to us, we start going down this path to raise funds to secure a lawyer that's familiar with the ins and outs of the CRTC to help us submit an application for 8 1 1 in Canada. And lo and behold, there was such an energy around this. Everybody wanted 8 1 1 in Canada. The amount of anticipation around this was really feverish to be quite honest and in no time at all, and this is not easy to do, but in no time at all, we raised over a hundred thousand dollars to work to secure a lawyer to submit, help us submit this application to the CRTC. Now, the CCGA at the time was barely an organization.

[\(05:49\)](#):

I don't even think we were registered yet as an organization, a nonprofit society, and yet word traveled fast and in a very short amount of time, we raised a hundred thousand dollars for this application, and we secured a lawyer. And with him, we began to work on this application for 8 1 1. And I think it was during that time, if my memory serves that he told us, oh, by the way, eight ones already allocated to telehealth. And well, what does that mean? Well, it means that you guys, CCGA, you need to start speaking to the provinces to tell them what you want to do because, and interestingly enough, and this has even blew my mind even more, Alberta was the province, Alberta Health Services. It was the organization that secured 8 1 1 for telehealth for the whole country. Yeah, because it's all one body. That's why. Yeah.

[\(06:56\)](#):

So all of a sudden, nationally we have 8 1 1 is allocated to, well, it wasn't all of a sudden as it had been done years before, but nobody knew 8 1 1 is allocated to telehealth and for all the provinces. So then it came to pass that we had to, at the urging of this CRTC lawyer that we had secured, we had to go across the country, myself and other gentlemen, Todd Scott and a few others, we had to meet with different provinces, the health organizations across the country to find out what they were going to do with 8 1 1. Could we get it from them? And now whether or not this was a coincidence, I don't know. But in very short amount of time after we began to reach out to the various provinces, all of a sudden, Quebec, British Columbia and New Brunswick, actually, I think New Brunswick was first, they started promoting 8 1 1 Alberta.

[\(08:07\)](#):

The province that secured 8 1 1 for telehealth across Canada was not going there. And their response to us was, well, we asked the question, well, you secured this three digit dialing. Why didn't you ever use it? Their answer was, we don't have the resources. Well, what do you mean? Well, three digit dialing will likely increase the number of calls to telehealth tenfold. We simply don't have the resources on-call staff to do this, because essentially people are going to call that number for triage. My kid has a fever, I've cut my finger. I don't want to go to an emergency. What should I do? And so they have to do triage. So they need health professionals to do that. So they had reluctantly, they secured this great idea. We have three digit dialing for telehealth, but we don't have enough resources. We're not going to do it.

[\(09:02\)](#):

Now, as my colleague and I from the Canadian Common Ground Alliance, who worked with Enbridge Gas in Atlantic Canada at the time, we began Coin Province to province and speaking with various health ministries, and not one of them was ready to give it up. They knew that they had something, and it takes a long time to get this. So we went back, I do recall we had a meeting with the Canadian Common Ground Alliance, the members at the time, and we decided, you know what? We can't let this pass. We want to work with telehealth. Perhaps the CRTC would be willing to do a bit bit of a mix here that we would help promote telehealth while promoting safety. So a person would dial 8 1 1, press one for telehealth and two for locate. And that's how we crafted our application to the CRTC. Now, looking back now, I don't think it had a snowballs chance in hell, but that's what we did.

[\(10:15\)](#):

And we submit the application and we waited. And it was around that time that I was hired by Alberta One Call, and I began working with Alberta One Call, and we were waiting for that decision from the CRTC. And finally the only the decision came to pass. No, the answer was no, we're not going to allow this. And that was that. So I had to go back now to Canadian Common Ground Alliance, the Canadian Gas Association, cipa, and the CIPA meeting stands out in my mind so vividly to this day. Now, you got to remember these pipeline companies, they were so hot on getting 8 1 1 for Canada, and we all were, it was they have this powerhouse of public awareness and the resources around it. Imagine an entire continent working towards 8 1 1. And that had a lot of equity. So I go back to the Canadian Energy Pipeline Association.

[\(11:28\)](#):

They had a, I believe it was maybe the Operation Steering committee, but it was some high level people in this meeting. And I had to give a presentation on, well, what do we do now? And this is when weeks before or I don't know how long before months maybe I had a pretty strong suspicion that this isn't going to fly one telehealth two for locate, it's not going to fly. What are we going to do for Plan B? And that's when I recall being in my home and I thought, well, what if I secured A URL click before you dig.com? What if I secured that? So I went on GoDaddy and now remember we had raised over a hundred thousand dollars for this application of the C-R-T-C-I go on GoDaddy. And lo and behold, it's available, click before dig.com actually.ca everything was available and not really realizing I should have secured them all.

[\(12:31\)](#):

I only secured click before.com, and it was like for \$12 and 95 cents, that's all it costs. And within about a minute, I had secured the URL and I just kind of left it there, kind of forgot about it, but it was always in the back of my mind. So now I had to go to Sippa months and months later after the CRTC had given its decision like, no, we're not going to agree to this. And I had to give a presentation to the CPA steering committee. I believe it was what we were going to do next. And so I told 'em the story of what I'm telling you now. And then what I had done in my slide deck, I created a mock website of click before you dig.com, and at the time was only Canada and where you click on any province and you begin to locate request process online, it was the most obvious plan B that we needed a logo, we had a brand, I even got a brand and it was the most obvious plan B. And when I explained what I had done and I secured the URL and we were going to make it available, I remember it was a senior VP with TC Energy at the time, and he said his question was, Mike, why didn't we do that first?

[\(14:05\)](#):

And I remember just stopping in my tracks and in my brain I'm thinking, don't say what you want to say because you'll get kicked out. And I just said, well, this was the most logical plan B, and it would've been nice to secure 8 1 1 for Canada for all the right reasons, but this is the right plan B. But I had already sold

it a little bit prior to that question that this will moving locate requests to the web will alleviate a lot of the challenges that we see with a call center, get people off the phone. And at the time, that was it. I mean, that was the limitation of the thinking, get people off the phone. We know now that not only does it get people off the phone, but a locate request online reduces damages because the person who's submitting the LOCATE request, nobody knows better than they do where they're digging and they actually go in and put the polygon in and they say, I'm digging here.

[\(15:13\)](#):

They see where they are on the screen. So it takes a lot of that out. A lot of that guesswork out. Maybe somebody saying, I'm the southeast corner of Maine and whatever first street, and we're actually on the southwest corner so it gets plotted wrong or something like that. So it takes a lot of that guesswork out. And once we realized, and it wasn't immediate, but a couple of years later that wait a minute, not only is this really helping with the backlog of people waiting on the phone during the digging season, we're actually reducing damage as we go this way. This is a best practice. Why are we even promoting the phone if we know this? And here we are a number of years later, and about three, maybe almost four years ago in Alberta, we went to our heavy users for the phone, the contractors and members, and said, guys, in a few months, you can't do this over the phone anymore.

[\(16:16\)](#):

You have to request online because we want to reduce damages. We do this, we provide this service to reduce damages, help us. And we took away the phone service for the members and contractors, homeowners, yeah, they can still request a locate by phone. They dig once every five, 10 years, maybe once in a lifetime. So it just makes sense. But going back that, and I get asked every time I go down to the us, I give presentations. I am part of different committees. I get asked, why doesn't Canada use 8 1 1? Well, that's why. And I thought this story that needs to be told, and it didn't happen by accident. It was actually plan B. And yet it was the best in my view. And from a data perspective to reduce damages, it is far superior than the phone. And my thinking now, and not just my thinking, I am dedicated that we need to promote the web over the phone. Just like you look at years ago, we eliminated fax, receiving fax messages for a locate request. We're down to like 4%. And if a person can submit a locate request by fax, then they can do it on the web. And we turned off the fax machine basically.

[\(17:55\)](#):

Probably not in my lifetime, but I think the phone one day will turn off as well. It's an organic thing where, okay, the members and contractors, they're

Doug Downs [\(18:05\)](#):

There. Gen Z doesn't want to use the phone.

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

Oh yeah. I mean the phone is not a phone, right?

Doug Downs [\(18:10\)](#):

Right. Millennials are kind of caught in the middle. The Xers, like you and me and the boomers, they insist on using the phone, but at some point we dig our last hole, so to speak. That's

Mike Sullivan [\(18:21\)](#):

Right.

[\(18:24\)](#):

April is dig safe month across the nation, across North America. What better way to recognize dig safe month than having a very large utility register their assets with utility safety partners today, April 3rd at 10:00 AM the buried telecom utilities, formerly owned and operated by Shaw Communications, which is now owned by Rogers Communications, went live in our system. That means when you submit a locate request to Utility safety Partners, it will also capture those assets that are now owned and operated by Rogers Communications, the assets formerly owned and operated by Shaw. You do no longer have to submit a locate request in addition to ours to USP to dig Shaw. You no longer have to do that. So to Mark dig safe month, I can't think of a better story that does it. You see it. I see it. You can buy your shoes online. I mean Amazon

Doug Downs [\(19:32\)](#):

All the time.

Mike Sullivan [\(19:33\)](#):

How many Amazon trucks you see driving through every neighborhood, every street, Canada, it doesn't matter where you are. There's Amazon is delivering and you don't do that over the phone. So you want to order a pizza, you're doing it online, nobody's calling anymore.

Doug Downs [\(19:46\)](#):

This is like the B side of a record turns out to be the hit.

Mike Sullivan [\(19:50\)](#):

Yeah, exactly. You're exactly right. It was a happy circumstance, it was a great effort. But you know what really was interesting? If you pull back for a moment and say, okay, well we didn't get what we wanted. We didn't get 8 1 1, but what we did get out of it was we had a people from across the country coming together for a common goal. We had a rallying cry, we had an objective, and it was sensational. The amount of energy that objective to curate one one in Canada created and looking back, it was the beginning of what the Canadian Common Ground Alliance is today. Following that, we were mentioned in the Senate when one of a previous Senator, Rod Zimmer, when he mentioned Call before you dig, click before you dig in the Senate, recognizing Dig safe month. And that happened a few times. We were invited by the Canadian Gas Association to give witness testimony for a Senate hearing on the safe transportation of hydrocarbons.

[\(21:15\)](#):

And the testimony that we delivered at the time, we actually sparked something in the Senate and they ended up doing another study on One Call Systems in Canada. It was that objective and that study where for the first study, we were the last witness testimony for the next study. I was the very first one to give my witness testimony and we got to set the bar. We got to set the tone of that entire study. And when the Senate came out with their recommendations, they had four recommendations and every single one of them was kept legislation, move this forward, recognize the best practices, recognize CSAs at 2 47, which is a damage prevention standard. And that created the relationship we had or I had personally with Senator Grant Mitchell, who really took this matter of public worker community safety vis-a-vis damage prevention, buried utilities under his wing.

[\(22:28\)](#):

And it became this crazy objective that he had as well, a shared objective. He wanted to see legislation in his tenure. I think I've talked about that on a previous podcast. He invited me to lunch in Ottawa and in the parliamentary lunchroom and diner I guess. And he was telling me, he says, well, I said, what would it take to secure legislation? And he says, well, we'd have to appoint parliamentary council to work with you to draft legislation. We'd have to walk that through the Senate and get to third reading Royal Assent and then go to the House of Commons. And he explained it all very casually. And I said, well, why don't we do that? And he looked at me and he looked at his colleague sitting next to him, his assistant, and he said, I want you to call Parliamentary Council tomorrow and we're going to assign somebody to work with Mike.

[\(23:23\)](#):

And that was it. Wow. So all these things happened. They just like a crazy chain of events over a course of number of years. But it all began with that objective to secure 8 1 1 that failed objective. And I am using air quotes here, fantastic. The failed objective to secure 8 1 1 and ultimately the legislation, it was adopted in the Senate 2017, May, 2017, and then it went to the House of Commons and it died. Unfortunately, it was Ministry of Transportation. The railways didn't want it and it wasn't going to fly. But we working with that parliamentary council, over months, we drafted legislative language that is applicable today. We're using it here in Alberta for our own objectives for legislation. So nothing is ever lost. You might think, well, we didn't get this. We didn't get that. Nothing's ever lost. Nothing is ever lost. And you have to keep persevering and you have to have that historical property, that historical review, like, okay, we didn't get what we wanted, but what didn't we get? We're further ahead today than we were back then. We were yesterday. Let's keep capitalizing that on that keep moving forward.

Doug Downs [\(24:40\)](#):

And specifically American organizations, do you hear from some now saying, Hey, this whole digital thing you've got going on, how do we do that?

Mike Sullivan [\(24:49\)](#):

I do. And initially, and this is going back 10 years plus, I was waving this click before you dig Flag in the us and then people looking at me like, I had three heads, what are you doing? No, no, no, it's 8 1 1. And I remember even Bob KIPP saying, Mike, people in the us, they just want to call. And I said, I think we're the same everywhere. We all watch the same TV programs. And I stuck to my guns. And today I was just at a conference, the Global Excavation Safety Conference in New Orleans and click, before you dig online, locate Requests is an objective. The Facility Notification Centers Association to which I belong, that's one of the objectives. And everybody starts, oh, we're at 60%, we're at 70%. And then I wasn't in a meeting, but apparently somebody said, yeah, I think Alberta's like a hundred percent. No, we're not

Doug Downs [\(25:42\)](#):

Contractors. Our members.

Mike Sullivan [\(25:43\)](#):

Close members and contractors are a hundred percent. And you got to give kudos where kudos is due. And Quebec was really the first province, the first place in North America that online locate requests really proliferated. And that was under the guidance of their president, Aniko Shane. He saw the value and he really pushed it that way, and we did too. I saw the value as well, but I think we took it to the

next level. And we secured click Before you dig as a trademark, we own the trademark, we own the URL click before you dig.com, Alberta one caller, utility Safety Partners.

(26:28):

Every quarter, we audit the entire site to make sure all the links are working, nothing's broken, and we repair it and we manage it on behalf of the Canadian One Call Centers committee. And so we took it to that next level. And just the other day, was it yesterday? I think I saw somewhere on the web where they had 8 1 1 and click before you dig two brands side by side. And it's like finally, finally, you can't ignore this. And when we talk about best practice, a best practice is a best practice is a best practice. You can't put style over substance. Now, 8 1 1 is a great brand, and believe me, I think it's wonderful, but the data tells me that when you submit a locate request online, you reduce the images. Therefore, it's a best practice.

Doug Downs (27:24):

It's going to be tough, but Gen Z is going to own a home at some point in the us and they don't want to call.

Mike Sullivan (27:31):

Nope. They really dont.

Doug Downs (27:31):

That's just the reality. And the Alphas, forget it. I don't even know if they know how to make a call.

Mike Sullivan (27:37):

No, they really don't. So

Doug Downs (27:39):

No chance. No, no chance. I don't know if they'll create social media sites or what they'll do, but digital is the way

Mike Sullivan (27:45):

It absolutely is. And the objectives we have now is managing the English as a second language. So the ability for somebody who this Cantonese, Punjabi and JAB, and that's their language, they are able to go online and submit a locate request because the language is not there. Online. We're talking a lot of jargon, which was familiar to the damage prevention industry or whether rights of way or servitude or something like that. It's specific language in a lot of cases. And that's where we need to go next because especially here on everywhere, not just Canada, but North America, we remain a melting pot of multiculturalism. And that buried utility, it doesn't care if you are Caucasian or Asian or it doesn't care.

Doug Downs (28:42):

Right. And everyone deserves the same access to safety and safety information. Absolutely. Yeah.

Mike Sullivan (28:46):

And that's where we need to look now. And we are do as we do promotions in various English as a second language promotions, but when the person goes to the web, we're still limited. We're still limited. So Google Translate does a pretty good job, but it's not perfect.

Doug Downs ([29:09](#)):

AI is going to resolve that for you. It's just a matter of time before generative AI fixes that.

Mike Sullivan ([29:16](#)):

AI is no longer just a sandbox

([29:19](#)):

Was six months or a year ago. It's really come along.

Doug Downs ([29:22](#)):

Want to have a little fun with a little quiz to wrap up this episode? Sure. Okay. We've been talking about 8 1 1 almost came to Canada, so I've got a list here of all the N one one codes in Canada. Oh boy. Okay. No cheating. No cheating. No, I'm

Mike Sullivan ([29:37](#)):

Not. I'm not. I know a couple of them.

Doug Downs ([29:39](#)):

2 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([29:40](#)):

I think that's the Canadian Institute for the Blind.

Doug Downs ([29:42](#)):

It says Public information and referral services here.

Mike Sullivan ([29:46](#)):

I thought it was CNIB, but McKay, maybe

Doug Downs ([29:48](#)):

I'm wrong. 3 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([29:49](#)):

That's information like civic information, that type of thing.

Doug Downs ([29:51](#)):

Non-emergency, municipal government, non-emergency. Okay. Yeah. 4 1 1

Mike Sullivan ([29:57](#)):

In general information. Right?



Doug Downs ([29:58](#)):

Local directory.

Mike Sullivan ([29:59](#)):

Okay. Local directory.

Doug Downs ([30:00](#)):

Yeah. Right. And popular in a lot of hip hop songs. What's the four? One one, right, and 5 1 1. Yeah,

Mike Sullivan ([30:06](#)):

Because I'm a hip hop guy.

Doug Downs ([30:07](#)):

I would think you would be. Yeah. What's 5 1 1?

Mike Sullivan ([30:10](#)):

That's transportation, roads,

Doug Downs ([30:12](#)):

Weather and traveler information. Okay.

Mike Sullivan ([30:14](#)):

There you go.

Doug Downs ([30:14](#)):

Yeah. 6 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([30:16](#)):

That is reserved for the telecoms, I believe.

Doug Downs ([30:18](#)):

Repair service. It says, I think you're right though. 7 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([30:23](#)):

I haven't a clue.

Doug Downs ([30:24](#)):

I think it's for emergency slushies. And if you need taquitos.

Mike Sullivan ([30:34](#)):

No, seriously, what is it?

Doug Downs ([30:35](#)):

It's 7 1 1 is a message relay service is what it says here. Oh, I don't know a lot about 7 1 1. I'm more familiar with

Mike Sullivan ([30:43](#)):

The other. Probably not. A lot of people use it if we don't know about it.

Doug Downs ([30:46](#)):

Exactly. 8 1 1.

Mike Sullivan ([30:48](#)):

Well, that's telehealth. Yeah. And now broadly used by the way,

Doug Downs ([30:51](#)):

Right? Yes. Right. And 9 1 1 is the obvious.

Mike Sullivan ([30:54](#)):

Well, emergency services. Yeah.

Doug Downs ([30:55](#)):

Good. Yeah, you passed the

Mike Sullivan ([30:57](#)):

Test. Anyway, that's the story about 8 1 1 in Canada. I know it's a bit of a different idea, a different podcast, but awesome. Now you know what I know, which is

([31:09](#)):

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. You can follow us on X, formerly known as Twitter at Utility Safety. And we're also on Instagram and Facebook and LinkedIn. If you'd like to send us a note, maybe you have an episode idea, email us at [info@utilitysafety.ca](mailto:info@utilitysafety.ca) and please put podcast in the subject header. I'm Mike Sullivan, president of Utility Safety Partners. Click to know what's above and below. One click costs you nothing. Not clicking could cost you everything.