

Announcer (00:02):

You're 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 (00:16):

Hi everyone, and thanks for joining me on the podcast today. Today my guest is me. It's just me, and I don't get to do this too often, so bear with me. A couple of things I want to talk about today is primarily the kind of season we've had. The digging season was good, but we certainly had some challenges this year with no responses. And our contact center was inundated with phone calls, an incredible increase in percentage wise, over 40% more calls this year, not locate requests, but people following up on locate requests didn't get their locate or whatever the case may be. And that was just put an incredible strain on the contact center. And I want to acknowledge my colleagues in the contact center who call after call after call of dealing with no responses, they managed to get through it. But to be quite honest, for a contact center this year was probably one of the uglier ones in that regard.

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That said, I mean the locate requests are right where they should be and online locate requests, click before you dig is always the same, close to 90%. Contractors and members are about 99%. The only reason why they're not a hundred is because emergency locate requests, they have to be called in. So those numbers are really good. The unfortunate part though is the no responses really hit us hard this year. And we're going to do the best we can to get through that and put some things in place that alleviate that going forward. It's not sustainable, quite plain and simple. It's not sustainable for the contact center and we have to make sure that we don't endure that again. Some of the things that are going well, obviously the alternate locate provider continues to be a fantastic option for those who wish to exercise it. And again, it's not mandatory that a person or sorry, an excavator, professional excavator can choose that ALP option, the alternate locate provider, instead of waiting for we'll call conventional locates, if you will.

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And because those conventional locates can have some significant delays. And if you are an excavator and you are performing that work for a proponent that is amenable to securing an ALP, it makes sense. It seems to make sense. And when you look at the data and everything we do in our contact center and the damage prevention process, everything we do is really based on data.

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The shift to online locate requests over a dozen years ago was based on data. First and foremost, it was, well, we can essentially open the contact center twenty four seven if we go online, click before you dig. And then soon after we realized that not only can we go twenty four seven, but the likelihood of damage decreases by a significant margin if we mandate online locate requests. And we did so for members and contractors. And that was again, based on data, just made all the sense in the world. And ALP, well, the alternate locate provider, it's showing similar benefits that we thought might happen and they definitely have. For example, the damage ratio for conventional locating, I think it's around 2.7 damages per thousand notifications. Whereas the ALP damages is something almost incomparable, 0.0006 damages per thousand notifications. So way less than one for a thousand notifications.

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So you can't even determine... The benefit is so vast in terms of reducing damages. Now why is that?

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Why are ALP locates so dramatically different when it comes to damages? It's kind of simple actually. The person who's locating, they aren't as rushed. They're working for you and they're not looking, got to get to the next job, the next job. They are working for you directly for you and the communication level between the person locating and the proponent, that foreman, the proponent of the contract is extremely high. When that happens, when you have excellent communication, you're going to have excellent results. And that's exactly what has happened with the ALP. It's no magic. It's not that the locators are that much better or anything. It's just that they aren't as rushed and they have a great opportunity to have that communication. And once an excavator has gone down the ALP route, what we are discovering is that excavator will likely choose the same contractor time and time again.

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And now you've built a rapport with that locating contractor, whether it's the person or the company, but you built that rapport and the locating contractor, similar, they're building a rapport with you and that will likely bode good results too. So that's been a tremendous boost to the damage prevention process. Recognizing again, it's not for everybody and not everybody's in a position to select the ALP, but for those who do, it is a great option. And if you have thought about it, I'd urge you to consider it, look into it. Another great thing we did this year, and we're still anticipating the positive results, was the look up and live application. And when Utility Safety Partners, when it became Utility Safety Partners, they emerging or unifying with the Alberta Common Ground Alliance and the Where's Align program, the Joint Utility Safety Team, that gave us an opportunity to promote awareness of overhead power line safety and to begin to look at the safety element of working near overhead power lines just in general.

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And we looked for a long time, how can we improve? How can we reduce contacts to overhead power lines? Initially, we rolled out a pilot whereby any person who submitted a locate request that we would also inform them, oh, by the way, here's the buried utilities and here's the overhead power lines you're working there and to contact those utilities overhead utility owners directly. That resulted in roughly 50,000 notifications to the digging community, but it wasn't really a sustainable method to promote awareness or to reduce damages. And then we looked at the look up and live application, which my friend and our industry colleague, Glenn Cookie, as we affectionately know him, we looked at the application, I'll call it a map location, that he created in Australia to simply provide any person with this free online tool to see the overhead power lines in relation to wherever they might be working.

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And when that was released in Australia, contacts overhead power lines reduced by 50%. Now, it wasn't just because of the map location. It was also that the promoting awareness with rotomarkers, markers attached to the overhead power lines that move with the wind and they'd catch your attention, eliminating that momentary blindness that we tend to see. We started thinking about contacts, overhead power lines. Why is that? Why does it happen? I mean, you look up, you can see them. You should be able to avoid them, but it doesn't happen that way. Not like a buried utility where it's buried, visible to the naked eye until you actually expose it or identify its location through locating marking. An overhead power line you can actually see. And yet the contacts with those overhead power lines happens all the time and far too often, I might add. When we look at the contacts overhead power lines and the injuries that occur, it's actually far more prevalent than contacting a buried utility and injuries associated with that.

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And we knew we had to do something. So working with industry and primarily with ATCO Electric and a gentleman by the name of Nathan Couture who has been on this podcast and with the other utilities

involved, we were able to finally realize release of the Look Up and Live application. Now the data is still not entirely available. We know it's being accessed, we know it's being used, but how many damages or how many contacts has it reduced? We don't know yet, but I'm confident that it will. If you look at the click before you dig, call before you dig process over the years, we'll never know. We'll never know how many damages it has eliminated, it has avoided, had stopped, how many lives it saved, we'll never know. And how do you measure what didn't happen, which was actually the topic of a previous podcast many podcasts ago.

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And how do you measure what didn't happen? It's possible, but it's not easy to do. So that was an excellent release this year to finally get that out the door and we are tracking it continually to see where that goes. The other big one of course is the Damage Prevention Professional Certification Program, something that is very near and dear to me. And this is one of those programs which is, again, it's hard to identify its benefit, but I believe it will be extremely beneficial in the years to come. You've heard me talk about it and you've heard my colleague Corla Kanik talk about it, but if you think about a certified registered safety professional or anybody who has accreditation, that accreditation, that recognition that goes along with it, you begin to solidify that task, damage prevention in this case. And damage prevention has been around, the objective has been around for decades obviously, but we've never wrapped our arms around it and said, "If you take these core courses, if you take these electives, if we identify this kind of training and develop it over time, then the person taking those courses, succeeding in passing those courses, they get that baseline knowledge for damage prevention.

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You can ask me or any of my colleagues or any manager of damage prevention or ground disturbance coordinator, public awareness coordinator, anybody who's involved in damage prevention process, what's your education? What makes you qualified to be that damage prevention manager? What makes me qualified to be president of Utility Safety Partners?" Well, experience, okay, that's good enough, I guess. But where's that baseline knowledge? Wouldn't it be beneficial if we had that baseline knowledge that the damage prevention profession could lean on and build from? And that's where we are with that. And I was so thankful to my board of directors when I presented the idea of the damage prevention professional and they agreed to it because it's a leap of faith. It truly is. I have great faith and I've already taken that leap when I presented it to my board. And then they took it with me.

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They took that leap of faith with me. And I am thankful that they did. And I'm looking forward to the day, and I don't know when that'll be, but I'm looking forward to the day when that curriculum or whatever it looks like is done. And obviously the baseline, it's never really done. It keeps being added to, but then it becomes recognized by perhaps training providers, training partners, who knows where it goes. And that will be a good day. That'll be a very good day when that happens.

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And like anything else, when you build a standard, when you build a training program, you're going to meet your objectives. The underlying objective will improve. We will reduce damages. We will improve the damage prevention process. We will improve recognition of the damage prevention process. And really that's what it comes down to. We have to build that. And imagine for an employer, if you will, if I'm hiring a new damage prevention manager and I receive a bunch of resumes and I get 20 resumes and 10 of them have taken the damage prevention professional certification training, that's a great start and nobody else has. That tells me that they are in a good position to move forward perhaps and be that

person to employ. That's where it begins to improve and then they share that knowledge with whomever they're working for or working with, and that's where we need to go with that.

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So when I look at the year we've had, it's been challenging for sure, but at the same time, I see great things happening. I see the ALP, APPC and Look Up and Live. Those are just three things we're working on. And then the big one, artificial intelligence, what's that going to do for us? And I'm sure you'll have all the doomsday people saying, "Oh, it's going to end the world." We've had the industrial revolution, we've had the digital revolution, and it hasn't ended us yet. I truly believe that artificial intelligence won't do that to us either. It will be change. It will be tremendous change. We're seeing it now, but where it takes us, it's going to be an interesting journey. And I don't know what that looks like, but I do firmly believe that we will improve. We will improve dramatically with artificial intelligence helping us.

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And I'm really glad to see that Utility Safety Partners is going down that path with a very strong perspective. And we aren't diving into the AI pool. We are dipping our toe in that pool and we are developing a strategy and we have in our program, in our budget for next year, a significant amount to develop that strategy, to develop what AI will do for us. I don't see AI in the near future replacing anybody. It'll just make our lives a lot easier and perhaps allow us for some predictability in what we're seeing. Wouldn't AI have been wonderful if it could have predicted the kind of season we had in the contact center with the amount of no responses that we didn't anticipate. For years, we've been seeing the number of calls in to our contact center dropping year after year after year. So much so that for this past year, 2026, we decided that we weren't going to hire as many agents because we simply didn't need them.

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Contact center is very interesting. On a Monday morning, maybe even till a Tuesday morning during the digging season, of course, which begins in May for some reason. Well, not for some reason, but that's when it begins. And until about end of June, Monday morning to Tuesday afternoon is absolute mayhem. The number of locate requests that come in during that time is phenomenal. And thankfully, most of them are online, but homeowners are getting into it at that time as well and they're calling in. About 50% are calling in, maybe a little less than that. And our agents are extremely busy, but not only with that, with the no responses too.

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And then when you come to Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, it gets very quiet. And even though we're completely remote, we would send people home so they no longer have to work. We'd say, "Hey, we need four people to put their hand up and don't have to work the rest of the week or the day, whatever it might be." And we would do that routinely. And for the last number of years, we were doing that more and more because the number of locate requests was being handled online, the number of calls in relation to a locate request, somebody asking a question about it, whatever it might be, was reducing as well. And so this past year we made the decision we're going to hire two less agents. And then we had this year come out at us that we never anticipated with the number of no responses that we did.

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And it was really hard on the contact center. It was really hard. And I tip of the hat to my colleagues, the team leaders, to the contact center manager, to the operations director, to the agents, first and foremost, to the agents for enduring the year that they did. In my 15 seasons here, I have never seen this. So we are going to do everything we can to never have a season like this again because it's just not

sustainable first and foremost. And it does not embrace the concept that damage prevention is a shared responsibility. We all have to pull in the right direction to improve that damage prevention process, and that's what we're going to be working really hard on.

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Now, something I want to share with you, and by the time this podcast drops, it'll be public knowledge, but I am going to retire and I'll be retiring on April 30th, 2027. And the notice goes out tomorrow, which will be October 20th, 2026. And it's something I've been thinking about for a while. And by the time that happens, I'll be 61, which is a good age to retire if you're able to. And I've had a great, great career in the many things I've done over the last 40 years, just about, beginning in Montreal and Toronto with CPU Rail, and then in Calgary with the National Energy Board, Alliance Pipeline, HMA Land Services, and then for the past 15 and a half years with Alberta One Call and Utility Safety Partners. It's been the privilege and an honor of my working career to be in this role, to be leading utility safety partners, to be working with the colleagues that I have past and present.

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And just to be in that space with all of them has been a wonderful experience. Also, during that time when I was hired with Alberta One Call back in May 2011, I was leading the Canadian Common Ground Alliance. I was part of the group that incorporated the CCGA. And at the time, and right to the end, my Alberta One Call board was quite happy that I was doing double duty. They didn't mind at all. They gave me that space and I truly wish to thank them for that initial board that let me do that. People like Ken Harelko from NMAX at the time and Bruce Littke and so many others that gave me that opportunity and recognized that I needed to do that to keep it going. And then just before COVID, I think is when I resigned from the CCGA and I had been doing that role for at least 10 years because I was doing it prior to joining Alberta One Call in 2011.

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And that's when we unified resources here with Utility Safety Partners, Alberta One Call, Alberta CGA, the Joint Utility Safety Team. That's when we did that and it needed my attention, my full attention. Not to say it didn't have it before, but I did get pulled in a lot of directions when I was working with the CCGA. Had some tremendous experiences along the way.

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The legislation objective, bill S229, I think it was, if my numbering is still correct, was perhaps one of the high watermarks of my career and perhaps of the CCGA at the time. Tremendous experience. They were expected to be put into that role or that scenario. And it was truly an amazing career experience getting to work with people like on the CCGA board as well, who some are still there. There's only a few of original people left and Natalie Moreau, we've become wonderful friends over the years, Todd Scott, Doug Lap, Dave Baspali, who's no longer with the BC Common Ground Alliance, but he was in that role for 17 years before I came to Alberta One Call. So many people over the years that I've met and have had the opportunity to work with have enriched me and really made me who I am. And it's been a great ride.

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So that'll be some news you'll be hearing, but I hope to be part of whatever the future looks like for Utility Safety Partners. In fact, I know I will, but this organization, this company, this corporation is in really good hands. I cannot say enough good things about my colleagues, Shar Kirk, Gary Laycraft, Travis Mackey, Cassie Zaba, Joseph, all the team leaders, all the agents. I cannot say enough good things about them. Maybe I'm a little bit prejudiced, but I honestly don't think there's anybody better in the entire

industry than them. This organization is already in good hands to whomever comes along and Carrie, I pass the baton to, the torch to, it's in great hands. I think if anything, what I'm most proud of at Utility Safety Partners and Alberta One Call before that is giving people the opportunity to rise to their potential, to find what they do best and do it.

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And my job became one of hopefully taking obstacles away from them so they could do that and it sure has worked out well for Utility Safety Partners. I think we are one of the strongest notification centers out there, thanks to all of them. And thanks to our board of directors, which has believed in me and provided me with a latitude to do some perhaps unconventional things at the time. And we got it done. So thank you to all of them and thank you to you as well for tuning in when you did and letting me be part of your safety moment. Thank you.