

# Don't enter unprotected trenches

Following proper procedure when trenching minimizes cave-in risk

**The accident:** An excavator operator working on a sewer system installation struck two sections of pipe and broke them with the bucket of the excavator as he compacted material over a completed section of the line. To access the pipe to remove it, the operator removed the trench shield. The next day, two workers entered the unprotected trench to set new pipe sections. The trench wall caved in, burying one worker to his knees and one to his chest. After being freed from the trench, they were transported to the emergency room, where the worker who had been buried up to his chest suffered a cardiac arrest and died.

**The bottom line:** A post-accident investigation determined the deceased worker was a minor who was assigned to the company via a job placement program. Child labor laws prohibit youth workers to work in hazardous occupations. Furthermore, he was new to the company and had not yet participated in safety training. Also, although the excavator operator had to remove the trench shield to access the pipe sections, no one should have entered the 11-foot-deep trench until the shield was replaced.



Illustration by Don Lomax

## Skipped steps

Like many accidents, this one was preventable. Had the excavator operator replaced the shield, the workers would have been protected from the trench walls. Had the untrained worker known not to proceed without shoring or shielding, he would not have been in the trench when it collapsed. Here's what you should remember to prevent these situations:

**New task = new training.** If you're asked to perform new or unfamiliar work, complete the required training that applies specifically to that job beforehand. You can't work safely if you haven't been trained on the hazards unique to the situation. If you see fellow crew members working unsafely – such as in an unshielded trench – alert them to the potential dangers and advise them to stop

until the proper protective measures are in place.

**Leave things better than you found them.** Since the excavator operator removed the shield, he should have replaced after removing the broken pipe. It was his responsibility to leave the trench in a safe condition, which he failed to do. Make it a priority that, once you finish operating a piece of equipment, you leave each work area as clean and safe as possible.

**Realize an inexperienced crew member can hurt you.** New employees may have minimal construction experience. Although it's your supervisor's job to train them, you have a vested interest in their developing safe work habits. Mentoring workers who need guidance can help keep your entire crew safe.

*Information for this Safety Watch was taken from an accident report, the Center for Disease Control's NIOSH Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program and the U.S. Department of Labor's Fair Labor Standards Act. It is meant for general information only.*

Date of safety talk: \_\_\_\_\_ Leader: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Attending: \_\_\_\_\_

