

Dangerous chaos after trench collapse



Illustration by Don Lomax

A 17-year-old male laborer was killed and his coworker injured in a trench collapse during a job to replace a broken sewer line.

The day before the accident a trench box had been used to shore up the walls of the trench, but it had been removed at the end of the day and not put back in place. The two workers entered the unprotected trench the following day to check the depth with a grade pole and replace two sections of pipe.

When the trench wall caved in, it buried the 17-year-old up to his chest and his coworker to his knees. A foreman called 911 and emergency management personnel arrived within five minutes. In the meantime, the victims' coworkers had jumped down into the trench to try to free the two men, but when the fire marshal arrived he ordered everyone out of the trench, realizing that the trench was still unstable.

The foreman of the crew demanded that the rescue personnel enter the trench and had to be physically removed from the site. Coworkers however ignored the fire marshal's orders to leave the trench and continued to dig out the two men and administer oxygen to the younger worker. A backboard was lowered into the trench and the victims evacuated to the shallow end to where paramedics were standing by.

The 17-year-old died approximately five hours after the incident. His coworker was treated and released with minor injuries.

How this accident could have been prevented:

- Always use active trench protection systems such as shoring and shielding boxes
- When feasible, use 2D and 3D excavator systems to eliminate the need to go into the trench with a grade rod.

- Know and comply with all child labor laws. Work in dangerous conditions is prohibited for youth under 18 years of age.
- Make sure everyone on the site, including subcontractors, knows which workers are under 18 years of age.
- Ensure that a OSHA competent person conducts daily inspections of all excavations and adjacent areas and takes necessary measures to protect workers.
- Provide workers with training to recognize underground excavation hazards.
- Train workers not to argue with or disobey emergency management personnel, which can make a bad situation potentially much worse.

For more information on this accident and preventive steps you can take go to:

www.cdc.gov/niosh/face/In-house/full200003.html



Date of safety talk: _____ Leader: _____
Attending: _____