

Digging Through Compliance Towards Safety

By: Robert Lahey, Construction Safety Council

For decades, the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has emphasized the risks associated with work involving below-grade excavation operations. Trench safety has been the focus of a Compliance Directive (1985) and a National Emphasis Program (2018). A public awareness campaign continues today in order to raise public awareness about the need to prevent collapses and save lives.

The Construction Safety Council - a recent recipient of an OSHA safety grant on this topic - supports these initiatives by providing training at the local level to thousands of workers annually. From this experience, it is evident that employers have the best intentions, but too often do not adhere to current trenching and excavation standards.

In order to ensure 100% compliance, a competent person must be assigned to a jobsite, perform inspections, and deliver training to at-risk workers. This requires a complete understanding of the guidelines; foremost among them being the need for a system that protects employees from cave-ins, except when an excavation is made in stable rock or, if it is less than five feet in depth, an examination of the ground by a competent person indicates no potential for a cave-in (29 CFR 1926.651 and 1926.652).

Violations of this standard typically indicate indifference to the law, resulting in employees being placed in unsafe situations. Such willful acts are preventable and can be avoided by an investment in the training of supervisors who oversee this type of work. Instruction to competent persons is available through the national network of OSHA Training Institute Education Centers. Visit www.OSHA.gov/otiec to locate the nearest Center and register to attend Course #3015: Excavation, Trenching, and Soil Mechanics.

Beyond training, however, is the need to equip employees with the tools and supplies appropriate for the task at-hand. Although they may look similar, excavation sites are not equal. Workers must be enabled to address variations in depth, width, soil conditions, environmental surroundings, and scope of work. Each of these factors must be accounted for in the development of a thoughtful and thorough site safety plan.

The most important elements to consider in such a plan: 1.) Ensure a safe passage of entrance and exit from an excavation; 2.) Provide sufficient cave-in protection; 3.) Keep materials and equipment outside the trench far from the edges of the dig area; 4.) Look for standing water and test for atmospheric hazards; 5.) Inspect the excavation site and equipment regularly.

The consequences of an ill-conceived safety plan can be costly - and sometimes tragic. Therefore, trenching and excavating operations require a meticulous approach that is not prejudiced by a rush to "get the job done." There is simply too much at risk in underground environments where time and space are extremely limited. Instead, it is better to "Slope It. Shore It. Shield It."

PowerForward DuPage and the Construction Safety Council are pleased to partner in support of this continued effort to ensure that IBEW contractors and members [WorkSmart, BuildSafe](#).

Robert Lahey is the President & CEO of the Construction Safety Council located in Hillside, Illinois. For more than 30 years, the Council has delivered programs and services in support of its mission to improve human safety performance through education and training. Learn more at www.buildsafe.org.

