

When 811 Does Not Cover it All: Preventing Damage to Private Utilities

by Kemp Garcia

You just received a contract to conduct an excavation on a site. Prior to starting work, you call 811 (or the applicable “One-Call” number in your state) and schedule a public utility locate in order to minimize the risk associated with damaging unidentified underground utilities. Is your responsibility in regard to damage prevention complete?

In most cases, calling 811 is only the first step in damage prevention. Have you ever seen “Private Power in area” marked in red paint on a jobsite? The public locator is indicating that there is additional power on the site that he/she cannot locate because it is not part of the company’s contract. However, there are many instances in which a public locator will not indicate whether there are additional electric lines or other utilities in the area. A private locating company can identify the remaining unknown utilities. In other words, they start locating where the one-call locator stops. This is no longer a free service to the excavator. The 811 locators are employed by the utility owner or contracted by them to perform locates. Private locators are employed by YOU, the excavator, and they will charge a nominal fee for locating utilities in the area where you will be working.

A private locator should not start work until after the one-call responders have completed marking the documented public utilities, usually 48 to 72 hours following the notification. There are rarely instances where plans or maps of the private utilities are available. Allowing the public locators to complete their work ensures that the private locator does not have to identify which utilities are private and which are public.

This is a key step when dealing with damage prevention. A prudent excavator never wants to uncover any buried lines. Finding unknown utilities can cause injury, damage, and down time, as well as incur costs to repair the damaged line. Hiring a private locator gives the excavator an extra layer of protection from damaging undocumented private utility lines.

Excavators occasionally will say, “I will pay you to locate all private and public utilities; I do not have time to wait two days for the public locate to be complete.” However, this is not a safe damage prevention plan. Again, the private locator does not have the plans for the public utilities serving the property, and the public locators are responsible or liable for locating the lines only up to a point. Beyond that point, your private locator can continue the locate of underground, privately owned utilities, which include electrical lines to provide lighting in a parking lot, secondary power that feeds from building to building, private gas, communication, water, sewer, and other lines on the property.

Excavators may also indicate that a public locate request is unnecessary because all of the work will be conducted on private property. However, just because the work is on private property does not mean that a gas company will not assume the liability to locate up to a meter serving the building, or that the power company will not locate up to a transformer and/or meter. The decision not to call 811 does not mitigate the risk of damage to subsurface utilities, and it can be illegal. Review the laws that govern the “one-call” in your state.

I have conducted underground utility locates at about every type of facility: from school districts, universities, large manufacturing plants, apartment complexes, individual homes, and many more. Excavators at any of these facilities will often say, “I don’t think there is anything in the ground here, but clear it anyway.” A little time and a lot of paint later, the excavator will look at me and respond, “Guess I was wrong.” I am always amazed at the amount of undocumented subsurface utilities that I find on almost every site. People do not remember what is in the ground. Plans of the subsurface utilities are rarely available and are usually not up to date. So the best plan of action is to hire a locator to limit the risks posed by damaging underground utilities.

Having some knowledge that there are utilities under the surface is a crucial step toward damage prevention. But just because you called 811 and conducted a private locate does not mean that a person can dig without caution. The only way you will know exactly what is underground is when you expose it with machinery and/or shovel.

I would love to tell you that all lines can be found and located 100% of the time. But locating is not guaranteed, especially when locating undocumented private utilities. There is minimal information that can be provided. The private locator is just another line of defense when dealing with damage prevention. However, using a private locator on your site can save a company from injury, damage, down time, and costs of repair.

If you do not use a private locator now, I suggest you look into actively researching if there is a company available in your area. Searching the internet using Private Utility Locator and your location may help you find a company that can help prevent damage on your work site.



Kemp Garcia is the General Manager of Underground Detection Services in Seattle, WA. He is also on a panel to help rewrite the existing “One-Call” law in the state of Washington and is an expert witness in cases dealing with damage to subsurface utilities. You can reach Mr. Garcia at kemp@undergrounddetection.com.