

What lurks under the dirt?: Call before you dig

Written by

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Instead of hitting pay dirt, you will pay if you hit an underground line

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — August 11 is National Safe Digging Day, also known as 811 Day. The observance reminds anyone considering an outdoor project that breaks ground to get underground utilities marked in advance. Having the ground marked is free and easy to do; simply call 811 at least two full business days prior to starting a digging project. While state laws vary, utility companies generally have a few days to respond to a request.

“You might think you are just installing a mailbox or just using a post-hole digger or planting only a small flower bed” says Erin Hollinshead, executive director of [Safe Electricity](#). “However, underground utility lines could be anywhere, and they also shift over time.”

Lines should always be marked in advance each time you dig because some can be found only a few inches below the surface.

A person accidentally strikes an underground line every nine minutes. That's the time it takes to play the long version of the 1971 song *American Pie*.

"Every nine minutes, a person might be saying “Bye-bye” to some hard-earned cash." Hollinshead says. Fines aside, digging without knowing what is below the dirt could cause serious injury or a power outage.

People are tempted to skip calling in advance because they think striking a buried line will not happen to them, Hollinshead says.

"They assume that they will not dig too deep or that they will be careful; however, underground lines are unyielding," Hollinshead says "Their path is unpredictable, and hitting one can happen with one strike of a shovel or other tool."

Kevin Chmura, director of public relations for Illinois' one-call notification service [JULIE, Inc.](#), agrees.

"Striking a single buried utility line can cause injury, repair costs, penalties and inconvenient outages," he says. "Protect yourself and your family."

Every project, large or small, requires advance notification to 811. Call 811 or visit Illinois' 811 center website, Chmura says. For example, call before putting up a fence, installing a mailbox post, building a deck or patio, and planting trees and shrubs. Any project that breaks ground requires that underground utilities be marked.

Underground lines will be marked by each utility; however, locators do not mark private lines such as service to outbuildings, underground sprinkler systems or a gas line to a grill. Private lines are the responsibility of the homeowner.

If you are only digging in a small area of your yard, you can outline the area in white spray paint or with white flags to ensure that only that part of your yard will be located and marked.

Hollinshead suggests five steps to safer digging:

- 1. Pre-mark the proposed dig area with white paint or flags.**
- 2. Call 811 or go online to submit your locate request before you dig. There is no charge for the service.**
- 3. Wait the required amount of time (typically two business days).**
- 4. Respect the marks and do not move any flags.**
- 5. Dig with care. Avoid digging on top of or within 18–24 inches on all sides of utility marks, which may mean moving your digging project to another part of your yard.**

For more information about electrical safety, visit SafeElectricity.org. For more information about 811, visit call811.com.

SOURCE: [Erin Hollinshead](#), Executive Director, Safe Electricity

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ABOUT EXTENSION: [Illinois Extension](#) leads public outreach for University of Illinois by translating research into action plans that allow Illinois families, businesses, and community leaders to solve problems, make informed decisions, and adapt to changes and opportunities.

Safe Electricity is the award-winning, public awareness program of the [Energy Education Council](#), a 501(c) 3 established in 1952 on the campus of the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#). With offices located in Springfield, Ill., Safe Electricity operates under the [University of Illinois Extension](#) and is led by the [EEC Board of Directors](#). Since the Safe Electricity program was created in 2001, it has provided thousands of safety-minded resources to its more than 500 utility members from across the country to help save lives and reduce injuries.