

by Jeff Griffin ■ Senior Editor

8-1-1 Roll-Out Begins

CGA Says Significant Step In Damage Prevention Efforts

The nation's telephone service providers still have several months to implement the new national one-call notification number, 8-1-1, but the three-digit system already is in service in many areas, and in August, North Carolina became the first state to fully implement the program.

In addition, Verizon Wireless and many smaller, wired service providers already have completed the transition to 8-1-1, said Bob Kipp, president of the Common Ground Alliance (CGA), the private, non-profit organization implementing a comprehensive damage-prevention program to protect underground utilities.

Ultimately, 8-1-1 will replace individual seven-digit toll-free telephone numbers operated by one-call centers across the country. A call placed to 8-1-1 – no matter where the caller is – will be answered by the one-call center nearest the caller, including areas with multiple one-call organizations. One-call personnel then contact member organizations to locate and mark their utilities before excavation or other potentially disruptive construction begins.

The Federal Communications Commission adopted the 8-1-1 number for one-call in March 2005 and directed that the system be in operation nationwide by April 2007.

Problem-free

George Glenn, executive director of North Carolina One-Call Center, said no problems have been encountered with implementation of 8-1-1.

Soon after the FCC authorized 8-1-1, he said, we filed with the state utilities commission for its use in North Carolina and went through the process to determine the steps that would be necessary and costs that would be involved to implement the program. From the beginning, the telecom companies were very cooperative and supportive. The utilities commission approved 8-1-1 and set the date of Aug. 13, 2006, for it to be operational in our state, several months earlier than the FCC specified.

Glenn added that a number of the state's smaller telephone companies activated the 8-1-1 one-call number earlier this year, and that Verizon Wireless customers also are using the 8-1-1 number to contact one-call.

In March, Verizon Wireless announced it had completed deployment of 8-1-1 dialing throughout the company's nationwide footprint.

Making the new three-digit system operational requires addressing numerous technical issues, and telecom providers must program their systems to ensure that when a three-digit number is entered, the local telephone exchange routes the call to the appropriate one-call center serving the caller's geographic area. Considering the complexity of the task, Kipp said the process is proceeding at a rapid pace.

Kipp said the three-digit system is a major step toward reducing damage to underground facilities by simplifying the one-call process. Currently, the more than 60 one-call centers in the U.S. receive more than 20 million calls each year. Despite that number of calls, it is estimated that in 40 percent of the more than 600,000 damages nationwide, no call was made to the one-call center prior to the excavation that resulted in damages.

The three-digit calling system, said Kipp, will increase awareness of the importance of contacting one-call before making any type of excavation and will make it easier for excavators to request location of facilities, which will result in fewer instances of damage. It is an important step in the overall objective of preventing damage to our underground infrastructure.

Prep

Preparations are under way now for a national awareness campaign to promote 8-1-1 with a core team of CGA members providing direction. A new logo and theme line – Know what's below. Call before you dig – has been developed and is available in English and Spanish.

Celeritas Technologies, Overland Park, KS, a consulting firm specializing in application development, product engineering and infrastructure management, has been retained to develop the rollout campaign.

Krysanne Kerr, Celeritas manager for the project, said promotional material including the logo and theme line, are currently available at www.commongroundalliance.com. To date, approximately 150 companies and associations have downloaded the artwork in preparation for the 2007 nationwide change to 8-1-1. Press releases and print and broadcast materials are to be available to one-call centers, as well as companies and associations by the fourth quarter of 2006.

CGA is sponsored by more than 30 agencies, contractors, and public and private utility providers whose members conduct much of the organization's business on a volunteer basis. About 300 of its more than 1,200 individual members are actively involved in determining the association's priorities and direction, said Kipp.

The CGA task team responsible for the 8-1-1 rollout is composed of members from the educational programs, marketing and membership committees. Co-chairpersons are Tom Shimon, executive director, Kansas One Call, and Dan Meiners, executive director, Utility Safety Alliance. Members are Kevin Chmura, Julie Inc.; Gina Johnson, Longhorn Pipeline; Patti Lama, Portland General Electric; Linda Sims, Consumer's Energy; Erika Andreasen, CGA; and Krysanne Kerr, Celeritas Technologies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

8-1-1:

Common Ground Alliance,
commongroundalliance.com