

# FATALITY NARRATIVE

## Pipelayer Dies when Trench Wall Collapses

**Industry:** Site Preparation Contractors  
**Task:** Replacing residential sewer line  
**Occupation:** Pipelayer  
**Type of Incident:** Trench collapse

**Incident Date:** January 26, 2016  
**Release Date:** March 13, 2017  
**SHARP Report No.:** 71-156-2017

In January 2016, a 36-year-old pipelayer died when the wall of the trench he was working in collapsed and buried him. The incident happened at a residential job site where the employer, the victim, and another worker were replacing a sewer line. The employer runs a small business that does sewer and drainage installation and repair work. The crew had been working at the job site for a week. There had been over three inches of rain during this time. Several trenches were dug in soil to allow workers to remove old pipes and install new pipes. The soil was unstable wet, loamy sand, classified as "Type C" soil. On the day of the incident, the crew was nearly finished with the project. The victim entered a trench to finish work on the sewer line connection to the house. The trench was 21 inches wide by 60 inches long and 7 feet deep. It was alongside a house foundation with a cement walkway on the other side. There was no protective system in the trench (though there was a hydraulic shoring cylinder near the bottom on one side). At 10:30 a.m., a wall of the trench collapsed, burying the victim. The coworker contacted emergency



The collapsed trench after the victim's body was recovered.

services and then attempted to dig out the collapsed trench. Fire department emergency response team personnel arrived on the scene within a few minutes. The rescue attempt soon changed to a recovery effort. The victim was declared dead at the scene. He died of compressional asphyxia.

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### Requirements

- Protect each employee from cave-ins by an adequate protective system. See [WAC 296-155-657\(1\)\(a\)](#)
- A competent person must inspect the excavation, adjacent areas, and protective systems each day before the start of work, as needed throughout the shift, and after every rainstorm. See [WAC 296-155-655\(11\)\(a\)](#)
- The competent person must remove workers from the excavation upon any evidence of a situation that could cause a cave-in, such as accumulation of water in the trench or protective system problems. See [WAC 296-155-655\(11\)\(b\)](#)

### Recommendations

- Do not enter an unprotected or inadequately protected trench or excavation, even for a short period.
- Before entering a protected trench or excavation, inspect it to ensure that it is safe to enter.
- Exit the trench or excavation and contact the competent person if you see that it unsafe.

### Resources

Trenching and Excavation Safety. Washington State Dept. of Labor and Industries.  
[www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Topics/Atoz/TrenchingExcavation/](http://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Topics/Atoz/TrenchingExcavation/)

National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety.  
[www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/wp-solutions/2011-208/pdfs/2011-208.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/wp-solutions/2011-208/pdfs/2011-208.pdf)

This narrative was developed to alert employers and employees of a tragic loss of life of a worker in Washington State and is based on preliminary data ONLY and does not represent final determinations regarding the nature of the incident or conclusions regarding the cause of the fatality.

Developed by WA State Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program and the Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), WA State Dept. of Labor & Industries. The FACE Program is supported in part by a grant from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH grant# 2U60OH008487-11). For more information, contact the Safety and Health Assessment and Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program, 1-888-667-4277, or visit [www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/FACE](http://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/FACE).