

SCGA Breakfast Series Deliver Powerful, Personal and Proactive Messages on Safety

By Ron Podbielski

A sunny spring morning, free of winter's chill. Yellow and orange safety vests dotting the crowd. Colorful ball caps and bunny hugs. The boisterous sound of voices, laughing, telling stories. A sumptuous breakfast and a welcome cup of coffee.

The most important thing? A safety message . . . delivered and received with great attention.

These were all the signs that SCGA's "Dig Safe Month" safety breakfast series was back . . . in a big way, after a couple years lost due to COVID and in 2022 where a reduced schedule meant just two breakfasts.

This year, the SCGA team of volunteers mounted 20 breakfasts, including six new locations, targeting front line construction employees with critical safety information, reminders and encouragement to work safely. More than 2,500 people registered to attend across Saskatchewan, with a survey indicating a quarter being first-time attenders.

It's a formula that has been tried in other jurisdictions. However, nowhere does it work like Saskatchewan, where the time-honored tradition of people sharing their morning eggs, sausage, bacon, hash browns and coffee before work is part of our own provincial fabric.

Another uniquely Saskatchewan thing? The breakfast and their programs are delivered entirely by volunteers across the province. Six SCGA volunteer team leads took time out of their busy schedules to participate in the breakfast program. Without their and their employers commitment to the time and program, the breakfasts would not have the same impact, something the SCGA deeply appreciates.

I had the privilege of attending two sessions in Regina and Balcarres and saw firsthand the effectiveness of the approach. In both locations, you couldn't help but overhear conversations with the anxiousness of wanting to get the construction season started, delayed due to yet another late arriving spring. Yet amongst the room, there is a collective understanding that unless everyone commits to work safely, serious incidents will continue to occur.

In Saskatchewan, there are still over 700 contacts per year with underground facilities or about three per every working day. It's a sentiment echoed by SCGA President Derrick Mann in the 17 minute safety video shown at the events. He reiterates that "together, we can make a positive impact on the digging community."

The safety video covered four pertinent topics:

- The new 30-day expiry policy for line locates, replacing the previous standard of 10 business days;
- Respecting utility encroachments when you build;
- The right to refuse work that may be dangerous or unsafe; and
- The importance of safe hand exposure techniques

The genuine power of the video is the personal stories, simply told by the peers of those sitting in audience. (One person jokingly notes how pleasant it is that all the people in video are from Saskatchewan and "not Alabama.") At both events, it is stunning to see the entire crowd engaged, eyes focussed on the screen, with nary a person using their cellphones to surf the web or text while the video is playing.

There is another chuckle or two and a roll of the eye when it comes to the part of video which shows customers building additions around or on top of encroachments or even attaching a deck to a SaskPower pole. But the room goes silent when information about workplace injuries is presented.

In Regina, Jonathan Sherman, Director, Prevention at the Workers Compensation Board, delivers sobering information about the ongoing reality. While the total injury rate has been cut in half since 2010, there are still about 2,400 serious workplace injuries occurring every year with around 35 fatalities.

The consequences of these numbers have altered the futures and lives of countless people and their families. But Sherman has optimism that a new fatality and serious injury strategy announced by the Government of Saskatchewan earlier this year will finally bite into these alarming figures.

To many, it's all about following safety protocols to the t and never forgetting the basics.

In Balcarres, event host Tyler Nicholson of Badger Daylighting reflects on his personal experience when he almost didn't do a line locate before a construction project at his property in Regina Beach. He came back shocked to discover where his facilities were located . . . and relieved an incident didn't occur.

As I left both events, I reflected on the many conversations I heard, the presentations and the video. We can be encouraged to read safety manuals and follow safety protocols in private. However, when we talk about safety together, when we share stories and when we look after each other . . . that's when safe working practices become real and truly "lived" on the jobsite.

That's why things like safety tailgate meetings and regular check-ins are critical not only to just protecting the infrastructure worked on, but also to our personal health and well being. That's why events like the SCGA breakfast series are so compelling . . . and well attended.

Everyone deserves to come home safe at the end of a workday.

In Balcarres, Nicholson concludes the breakfast with some timely words.

"If everyone here today brings another new person with them next year to this event, we can share this important message with even more workers. Everyone, let's do that."

Congratulations to all the SCGA team for putting together an outstanding and informative series of breakfast events. I look forward to seeing everyone back in 2024.

To find out more about Saskatchewan's Dig Safe breakfast program go to www.scga.ca/en/contractor-dig-safe-breakfast/

To view Saskatchewan's video library go to www.youtube.com/channel/UC2XvZBURYPMsoFupIR3HZXA

