

8-1-1: Alliance Launches New Call-Before-You-Dig Telephone Number

There's a new number in town, and the Common Ground Alliance is urging the public to dial it before they dig.

CGA, a utility damage-prevention coalition in Alexandria, Va., and its partners launched 8-1-1, the nation's new standardized "Call Before You Dig" number, this past spring. Already, it is available in much of the U.S, including Pennsylvania.

The organization is hoping that more people will use the three-digit alert — much like they dial 9-1-1 in an emergency — to prevent unnecessary injury, protect underground utilities, and avoid expensive repairs and fines when excavating.

"Every minute, 680,000 utility lines are damaged nationwide, and 40 percent of the damage is caused by people who fail to call before they dig," says Khrysanne Kerr, CGA's director of program development. These statistics, she adds, were alarming enough to prompt Congress to mandate the creation of 8-1-1 in 2005.

Now, CGA is on a mission to educate the nation, particularly do-it-yourselfers, about the phone number and the need to make that all-important call. The effort includes a large-scale public awareness campaign and a Web site, www.call811.com. According to CGA, roughly 90 percent of homeowners are unaware that they must dial 8-1-1 when they intend to move dirt, even if it's for a small project, such as planting a tree or installing a mailbox.

"We realize it will take time to change behavior," Kerr says, "so we're on a marathon, not a sprint."

Although in its infancy, the campaign appears to be working: 8-1-1 has been dialed more than 5.7 million times since it was introduced earlier this year, according to the Web site.

“Now that there is a single number to call, any time, there is no excuse for putting lives at risk by striking a utility line,” U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary E. Peters said at the 8-1-1 launch event. “If 9-1-1 is the number you call to report emergencies, 8-1-1 is the number to call to prevent them.”