Trenching and Shoring Fatality File

Construction worker killed when trench collapsed.

A 29-year-old construction worker employed by a small excavation contractor was killed when the trench he was working in collapsed and buried him in approximately 6 feet of dirt. The worker was part of a crew installing a sewer pipe at a residential property. The trench was 10 feet deep and approximately 3 feet wide in the area where the collapse occurred. The collapse occurred in an unprotected area of the trench, between two pieces of shoring that were spaced 15 feet apart.

When the trench collapsed, co-workers called 911 and attempted unsuccessfully to locate and dig the worker out. When emergency responders arrived, their first task before commencing rescue and recovery efforts was to shore up the trench to prevent risk of additional collapse and injuries. Emergency responders spent several hours recovering the worker’s body.

Key factors identified in this investigation included an inadequate trench protective system; no ladder available for entry or egress; and a spoils pile being placed too close to the edge of the trench. Underlying contributing factors were the lack of oversight by a competent person; and insufficient employee training on recognizing and reporting hazards.