

Teen Worker Loses Legs to Trencher

INCIDENT FACTS

REPORT #: 71-256-2024s

REPORT DATE: July 18, 2024

INCIDENT DATE: June 30, 2023

WORKER: 16 years old

INDUSTRY: Highway, Street, and Bridge Construction

OCCUPATION: Construction Laborer

SCENE: Residential construction site

EVENT TYPE: Caught in / amputation



INJURY NARRATIVE



A 16-year-old construction worker had both legs amputated when they were caught in a trencher. He was a high school student in a work-based learning program that allowed him to earn credit and gain job experience. He worked for his employer, a large general contractor, around nine months.

INJURY NARRATIVE



The teen was using a walk-behind mini skid steer with a hydraulic rotary trencher attachment. The day before the incident, the teen received a brief demonstration of the trencher by a supervisor. He then used the trencher for 2 to 3 hours. The next day, a foreman assigned him to use the trencher unsupervised to dig a channel for fence posts. After a half hour, he stopped to check the trench depth. He walked in front of the trencher without shutting it off. As he stood on the 8-inch trench, the sidewall collapsed and his legs were pulled into and severed by the trencher's roller chain.

INJURY NARRATIVE



While lying on the ground badly injured, the teen first tried to phone his mother and then his supervisor, who was off-site, but could not reach them. The teen sent photos of his injured legs to his supervisor, who saw the photos and called the workers at the jobsite. The workers rushed to aid the teen, called 911, and applied tourniquets to each leg. First responders arrived and had a critical care helicopter airlift the teen to the hospital where his life was saved.

INJURY NARRATIVE



Following the incident, investigators found:

- The employer had a student learner exemption permitting minors to do some work that was otherwise prohibited for workers under 18. The skid steer and trencher attachment were not part of the exemption.
- The teen had no proper training or experience that qualified him to operate the trencher and was using it alone and out of sight from co-workers and with no supervisors onsite.
- Requirements and restrictions for minors were not communicated from management to supervisors

INJURY NARRATIVE



Photo 1. Mini skid steer with trencher attachment at incident site.

INJURY NARRATIVE



Photo 2. Trencher at incident site. Arrow shows trench that was being dug.

INJURY NARRATIVE



Photo 3. Trencher attachment.

INJURY NARRATIVE



Photo 4. Close up of trencher roller chain and digging teeth.

Requirements

Employers must:

- Unless granted a variance by the director of the Dept. of Labor & Industries, not allow minors participating in a bona fide work-based learning program certified and monitored by the office of the superintendent of public instruction or the minor employee's school district to perform the prohibited and hazardous employments outlined in [WAC 296-125-0303](#), except those exempted in subsections (5), (8), (9), (11), (13), (15), (16), and (23).
- Permit only those employees qualified by training or experience to operate equipment and machinery. See [WAC 296-155-035\(2\)](#).

Recommendations

FACE investigators concluded, that to help prevent similar occurrences, employers should:

- Develop an accident prevention program (APP) policy that covers relevant employment restrictions for minors in [WAC 296-125-0303](#) and exemptions listed in the employer's approved variance application for minors in work-based learning programs. Communicate the policy at new worker orientation trainings, monthly safety meetings, and daily supervisor-led crew meetings before work begins.

Recommendations

- Ensure supervisors prohibit minors in work-based learning programs from hazardous work without direct supervision and/or alone, from restricted job tasks, and from restricted tools, equipment, or machines.
- Provide minors in work-based learning programs ample training, including refresher training, for each type of tool, equipment, and machine. Evaluate their knowledge and skills before allowing them to work.

Resources

[Teen and Young Worker Safety & Health](#)

Washington State Dept. of Labor & Industries

INJURY NARRATIVE



This narrative was developed to alert employers and workers of a tragic incident 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 injury.

Developed by the Washington State Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (WA FACE) Program and the Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH), Washington State Dept. of Labor & Industries. WA FACE is supported in part by a grant from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH grant# 5U60OH008487). For more information visit www.lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-research/ongoing-projects/work-related-fatalities-face.