**Why I Started a Locator Certification Program *(and why one is needed)***by Mike Parilac

**FACT:** The best locators in the world are the ones doing it now.

**OPINION:** A lot of people say today’s locators are not good enough.

**An Easy Target?**

There’s a meme that circulates on social media proclaiming, “I don’t always locate utilities, but when I do, I’m ten feet off.” This meme effectively summarizes what we’ve heard for years from excavators regarding the quality of the 811 marks. The locators who run 811 tickets might get a lot of flak from excavators, but is the quality of their work a lower level than that of other locators?

811 locating is unique to the other groups of locating. The excavator, who initiates the work, doesn’t pay for the work, has no choice in who performs the work, and has no remedy if the work is not performed in a timely fashion. Locators become the target of excavators’ ire because they are the only person in the 811 process the excavator sees.

Other locators come from private utility locating, engineering/survey locating, and construction crew locating. Over a nearly 40-year period, I’ve been in front of thousands of locators in these groups, and I’d say there is virtually no quantifiable difference in the knowledge and skills of these locators when comparing them to 811 locators.

Learning that many of the people who do private, engineering or construction locating started in 811 locating only serves to validate my conclusion.

**No One Wants to be a Locator**

What happens in the world of 811 locating passes through to the other locating groups. If people today don’t want to be 811 locators, they probably don’t want to be locators in the other groups either. What is it about 811 locating that doesn’t appeal to people?

One industry insider claims the typical job applicant “wants more for doing less, doesn’t want to work outside, doesn’t want to work longer hours in the summer.” I’ve also been told applicants see a murkier career path with locating work than that of other job opportunities. I believe that.

At this moment, it’s likely easier to attract people to openings in the other locating groups, since many of these jobs are filled by former 811 locators. But if the 811 locating pool dries up, so will the pool for the other locating groups.

**A Shrunken Younger Person Labor Pool**

Locating is not the only discipline going through tough times finding people. According to a July 26, 2023, story in *The Washington Post* outlining the recruiting troubles of the U.S. military, “the percentage of Americans ages 19 through 25 is at [a 15-year low](https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-age/?currentTimeframe=12&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D), which means the services — and many other employers — are all drawing from the same shrunken pool.

The economy clicks along at near-full employment and offers young people who might otherwise go into uniform attractive alternatives [and rising wages](https://www.wsj.com/articles/young-workers-rake-in-biggest-wage-gains-in-tight-labor-market-11646044201).”

Three days following *The Post* story, a July 29, 2023, *CNBC* story quoted an industry insider claiming, “There is a labor shortage. There are about 650,000 workers missing from the construction industry, and construction backlogs are now at a four-year high.”

If higher-paying construction jobs are going unfilled, it follows that the locating industry is going to find filling positions rough sledding.

**Late 811 Locates**

In Illinois, excavators file complaints to the state’s enforcement agency, the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC). I sit on the ICC’s Advisory Board, and I see some of the complaints. Almost all the excavator complaints I see have to do with 811 requests not marked by the utility companies on time.

In the first seven months of 2023, the ICC has surpassed its previous record annual dollar amount of willful violation penalties.

In the case of late 811 ticket responses, the utilities receive the ICC penalties although virtually all of these locates are performed by contract locators. The contract locating company typically pays, however, due to a contractual agreement with their clients.

Will these penalties motivate the contract locating company to hire more locators? Well, the locating companies say not a lot of people out there want to become a locator and no amount of penalty money is going to change that.

If successfully addressing late 811 locates is a priority, the locating industry must improve people’s perception of locating as a career path if employers want to get more people at the top of the hiring funnel. There’s also the issue of retaining people already on the payroll.

**Locating Completely and Accurately**

Let’s circle back to “the best locators in the world are doing it now” statement. Locating completely and accurately is the basis for what constitutes excellent locating results.

If there were more people wanting to locate than locating positions, competition would determine who becomes a locator. The odds of customers getting excellent locating results would be much higher in this scenario than if there were more locating jobs than people who wanted those jobs.

Except for 811 locating, the end customer has the final say in who is hired to perform locating work and the timeframe in which the work is completed. The customer can make decisions based on the quality of the locating results received. Competition determines which company wins more work.

There may be a couple of things that work in the favor of these locators, namely vacuum excavation and the absence of stress created by unpredictable incoming workloads. Construction crew locating may have these advantages, also, as well as enjoying the benefit of working in real time with the people who need the results.

**Career-enhancing Training**

I’ve had thousands of conversations over the years with locators regarding their training, and there are too few career-enhancing learning opportunities after initial training. For most locators, excellence in locating comes only following training later in one’s career. Here are the key areas of strength exhibited by excellent locators:

1. A command of the locating instrument
2. Knowledge of utilities including the ability to determine what structures are associated with which utilities
3. An understanding of how utility maps assist with completeness and accuracy of locating results

A desire to do the work cannot be ignored. A locator can have all the skills and knowledge necessary to do the job to a level of excellence but not have the desire to do the job well. This is true in any endeavor but in the locating industry, desire takes on a unique form because of locators’ occasional low self-perception due to external negative perception of the job.

There are people who locate 10 feet off and while there are multiple reasons this can happen, when it does, the mockery begins. How much derision can a person take before they lose their desire to do the job?

How can a line be located 10 feet off? One big reason is that some people don’t understand their locating instrument enough to fully analyze the information the receiver is giving them.

Here’s one real life example: A veteran 811 locator mismarks the location of a 2” plastic gas main locating instead an abandoned 2” steel gas main five feet away. He says he got “good tone” on the abandoned line and that’s why he marked it. What does it mean to have got “good tone?” It’s like saying I got a good vibe that I was marking the gas main correctly.

**A Sense of Purpose**

The desire to provide excellent locating results is most likely based on the sense of purpose the locator feels for their job. In the case of providing accurate X, Y, and Z inputs for mapping technology, the locator may think of their purpose as building the Google Earth of the Underground.

The desire to provide excellent locating results may also be driven by the respect one feels for their work. Verifying 811 marks, getting accurate depth estimations on those marks, and finding private utility lines for a construction crew may make the locator feel like an invaluable member of the team due to the time and heartache that this locating work can save the crew.

**Utility Mapping Technology**

We trust that technology can solve issues with late response to 811 tickets because we trust that technology can produce accurate maps that can take the place of people putting down paint and flags.

To create accurate maps, the technology needs accurate X, Y and Z inputs. Where do we get those? From the guy who says he got good tone?

Mapping technology needs a lot of competent people doing locating if in fact technology is going to effectively replace manpower in the field.

When you consider technology reduces the amount of manpower necessary to perform field locating, we’ll ultimately reach equilibrium, a point where the number of people who want to be locators is the same as the number of people who want those jobs.

The time will come when there are more people wanting to locate than there are locating jobs. Then, only those with superior skills and knowledge and the desire to perform locating work will be locators.

**Science**

Each locate result is explained by science and for locators to provide excellent results, they must understand the basic science behind electromagnetic locating. Unfortunately, there is not industrywide acceptance of the need for locators to know the science behind the locating equipment they use and the underground utilities they locate.

It would be impossible to find a recognized utility industry trade that does not insist that its workers understand the ways in which science impacts the activities of the trade.

At any given time in the U.S., 25,000 people are earning their living finding the location of underground utility lines. While some people find their career path in locating, most do not for one reason or another. One of the most unfortunate reasons is that there is no recognized accreditation level for locators that is standardized, unbiased, and credible. For there to be a career path in locating, there must a process of accreditation consisting of:

1. Testing of skills and knowledge—locator certification
2. A continuing education requirement to maintain certification
3. A “knowledge bank,” featuring the ability for industry to deposit and withdraw knowledge

**Locator Certification**

The training program used to train a locator doesn’t determine an individual’s locating competency. A standardized, independent, and unbiased locator certification program’s aim is to ensure that an individual can use their skills to deliver excellent locating results.

Becoming certified is an accomplishment that instills pride. Individuals proud of their profession naturally regard clear, concise communication and problem solving as their top priorities.

It’s encouraging to see online locator forums evolve over the years—from chaotic rants about employers, to more of a resource for those that want to learn a variety of things about the industry. Peer-to-peer learning is powerful, but it shouldn’t be limited to online forums.

The locating industry benefits from hosting more opportunities for locators to learn from each other’s experiences and knowledge. Continuing education can come in many forms, and locator certification renewal requires peer-to-peer learning events for locators.

One of the most common things I’ve heard about locators over the years is that they don’t know much about the utilities they locate. These comments suggest that if locators knew more about the utilities they are locating, their locating would be more accurate and complete. I agree, but I can tell you this lack of basic utility knowledge extends to pretty much every other damage prevention stakeholder group as well.

A knowledge bank established for locator certification benefits excavators, engineers, utility personnel, enforcement agency inspectors and others. These are people who need to understand that when there is a lack of accessing useful locating, utility, and mapping information, the result is higher rates of avoidable damage to underground lines.

**Failing is Not Failure**

How many candidates for certification will attain certification? Initially, a low percentage and that’s OK. People that desire to create a culture of excellence in the locating industry understand that rubber-stamping people to certification is not going to fix anything.

While there will be consternation galore with failed tests, locator certification is first and foremost a visible and transparent effort to learn what people know in order to teach them what they don’t. This is how the damage prevention industry achieves a greater degree of locating excellence.

**A Type of Currency**

The three pillars of a certified locator program—certification testing, continuing education, and establishing a knowledge bank—create a career path in locating, thus making certified locators a type of currency.

Currency has a value that is the same for both sellers and buyers. In a locating industry with locator certification, value consists of competent locators delivering excellent locating results for the utility, engineering, and construction industries.

*Currency is defined as:*

1. something used as a medium of exchange

2. general acceptance; prevalence; vogue

A recent industry report focused on the nation’s 811 system claims there is $61 billion in “waste, inefficiency, and excess cost imbedded in the system and largely invisible.” That’s a lot of opportunity to spend certified locator currency in the system that produces most every locator.

**The Answer is “Yes”**

Late response to 811 tickets is some of the excess cost embedded in the 811 system. Could the currency of certified locators be spent to address late 811 tickets? For that matter, could the currency of certified locators be spent to improve the results of subsurface utility engineering or utility design? Or to increase production and enhance safety for constructions crews?

The answer to all these questions is a resounding “yes.” Can you imagine what a collection of disrespected locators would feel if they could finally wear a badge proving their knowledge and skills? What, too, if the utility, engineering, and construction industries recognized locating as a skill worthy of its actual importance? Without locator certification that’s not going to happen.

Who will lead the push to use the currency of certified locators? 811? Private locating? Survey/engineering locating? Construction crew locating? Where will the currency be adopted to change exiting practices and systems?

We won’t have to wait too long for answers and that’s a great thing for people who want to clearly see a career path in the locating industry.

**Ignore No More**

I used to wonder why there was no locator certification program. As I talked to all those locators over the years, many asked the same question of me. My answer was always that until there was locator certification, locator certification would be easy to ignore.

Well, the certified locator program is here, and that’s good for the locating industry as well as a whole lot of other people in the utility, engineering, and construction industries. Locator certification recognizes locating as a skill as well as a respected trade. That’s hard to ignore.