

Essential services such as Mitchell's Towing are out on the road in all kinds of conditions — from pandemics to heat waves.

Reducing the risk in roadside work

By Jesse Marchand

Roadside work continues during the COVID-19 pandemic with many of these workers providing essential services. Keeping these essential workers safe requires a commitment from everyone.

Every day throughout the province, tens of thousands of British Columbians work alongside our roadways: first responders, road builders, landscapers, traffic control persons (TCPs), tow truck operators, telecommunications and utility workers, municipal workers, security guards, and more, all in close proximity to traffic.

Many of these roadside workers have been providing essential services during the COVID-19 outbreak and their work has been more important than ever.

For Mitchell Martin, owner and driver for Mitchell's Towing, getting people home safely is his highest priority — and that includes the customer, himself, and anyone else working for him.

“We render assistance for disabled motorists on the roadways,” says Martin. “Whether it’s one, two, three,

four o'clock in the morning, we'll respond and we'll do our best to take you to a safe area and remove you from the situation that you're in.” But the work isn't always easy.

“There are times for sure that I've been scared on the road. Vehicles are travelling way too fast, speeding by without any concern whatsoever.”

According to WorkSafeBC, 217 workers were injured or killed on the job between 2010 and 2019. Of those injuries, there are on average 1.3 fatalities a year. That means at least one person a year will never make it home from work due to an incident that should have been prevented.

For Martin, the cost of getting injured is too high. He runs the business with his wife and together they have three young boys.

“If I was injured on the job I think it would definitely impact our family a lot,” adds Martin. “Mentally, the toll would be overwhelming, I couldn't imagine the anxiety and the extra pressure that it would place on the family.”

Setting up a cone zone

For jobs like Martin's, the jobsite can be varied and the hazards numerous. From treacherous road conditions to heavy traffic, tow truck operators need to be prepared for whatever they might face when helping a stranded motorist. Other roadside workers, such as TCPs or road builders, must have a documented work zone layout for the worksite, but once on site the guidelines for setting up a cone zone are the same for both:

Before workers leave for the worksite:

- Ensure everyone is trained in safe work procedures.
- Ensure that everyone has the equipment they need to stay safe: From high-visibility vests to signs, cones, and barriers to raingear, sunglasses, or sunscreen.
- If the workers are using radios to communicate, make sure all are working, and test again at the worksite.

Once at the worksite:

- Ensure that a risk assessment and approved traffic control plan have been completed.

- Set up your cone zone signs and cones in the order that drivers will encounter them. Begin with the sign or device that's farthest away from your work area.
- Never turn your back to traffic while setting up.
- Once the cone zone is set up, travel through it to view it from a driver's perspective.
- Make sure the guidance is clear and easy to follow, and that workers are clearly visible.
- Check periodically to make sure the signs and devices are still in place.

To take the zone down:

- Take down the cone zone as soon as the roadside work is finished.
- Remove the devices in the opposite order of the set-up.
- Signs should be removed last.

For more info on setting up a roadside worksite, including work zone layouts, training, work procedures, and reporting incidents, see conezonebc.com.

Cone Zone campaign highlights need to keep roadside workers safe

The goal of the annual Cone Zone campaign is to raise awareness of the risks workers face in roadside work zones, and for employers, workers and drivers to each do their part to prevent deaths and injuries of roadside workers in B.C.

Created by the Work Zone Safety Alliance, the Justice Institute of British Columbia, and WorkSafeBC, the campaign — now in its 10th year — targets speeding and distracted drivers while providing resources for workers and employers who do roadside work.

This year, the Alliance has partnered with the British Columbia Construction Safety Association and the Automotive Retailers' Association to release two new videos featuring roadside workers and their families talking about the dangers of roadside work. The videos implore drivers to remember that every roadside worker has a story and life to go home to.

In the video "Christy's story," a traffic controller and one of her sons share a simple message. "I can get injured in a split second on the job," says Christy, who only uses her first name in the campaign. A mother of four, and a TCP for 15 years, she wants to ensure that drivers know there's a person behind the high-visibility vest. "We also have lives after this and we want to get home to those lives."

The driving force of the videos is that "drivers need to slow down when driving through a cone zone and pay attention to instructions from traffic control persons, temporary road signs, and traffic control devices," says Trina Pollard, manager, transportation and occupational road safety for OHS Consultation and Education Services, WorkSafeBC. "Stay focused on the road and leave the phone alone."

To check out the videos, go to conezonebc.com. 