



Jackie Jones is the WORKSAFELY™ education and training advisor at the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association



Bad or distracted drivers risk people's lives, limbs in construction zones

BY JACKIE JONES

There have been a number of alarming crashes in road construction zones this season, involving both commercial drivers and the driving public. The worst of these incidents resulted in the deaths of a 7-year-old and 61-year-old; both were passengers in vehicles appropriately stopped in a construction zone.

Construction zones are hazardous but perhaps nowhere more so than on highways, where the close proximity to vehicles passing at high speeds makes the worksite particularly dangerous.

With more people on our roads this summer due to COVID-19's travel restrictions, the hazards this season are greater for workers who step foot onto highways and roads every day.

When impatient motorists refuse to slow down, or drive too close to other motorists or distractedly, they can easily hit a construction worker, causing catastrophic injuries or death.

Ask any road worker about their job and they will roll their eyes and recall stories about dangerous drivers in highway work zones. No one wants to wait their turn. No one wants to slow down. Everyone gets impatient and some get angry. Many construction workers have experienced narrow misses or even been struck by drivers due to inattention or deliberately.

Jorian Stangl has held the position of a traffic control coordinator with Maple Leaf Construction for the last 5 years.

Stangl shakes her head at the 'near misses' she has witnessed.

"Our flag people deal with verbal and, in some cases, physical abuse daily. Rocks or beverages have been thrown at them."

When asked what

factors seem to play a role in these situations, Stangl said sometimes it's the area. For example, high traffic-volume routes tend to have more frequent incidents with motorists being impatient and irate. Sometimes the time of day, like rush hour or a Friday afternoon before a long weekend, can also play a role. But generally, this kind of behaviour happens on all job sites where motorists are affected, she notes.

Todd Turner, General Manager of E.F. Moon Construction, says education and training of workers is important to construction zone safety. Making the work zone highly visible to motorists, and keeping it neat and tidy, also can help reduce hazards and allow drivers to adjust upon approach.

"The easier you can make the movement of motorists through a work area, the safer it is for everyone," Turner explains.

"Motorists can get confused with the number of changes to their usual route. So, it is important to make a road work zone very easy to navigate through."

Ray Bissonnette, Safety, Health and Risk Manager for Nelson River Construction, agrees with Turner. Bissonnette also suggests a module specific to road construction zones could be added into the new driver training curriculum.

"We should be educating our new drivers on the importance of being alert in construction zones," Bissonnette says.

So, what's at risk for motorists not obeying construction zone rules?

You risk a collision involving yourself and/or other motorists. There can be workers on or near the road, operating heavy equipment, working with hand tools on the ground or acting as flag persons.

Road workers could also be hidden

behind equipment, materials, etc. The faster you drive, the longer it will take to stop.

Remember that even if a construction zone doesn't seem to have activity, there may be other hazards such as loose gravel or uneven pavement.

Drivers convicted of speeding through construction zones will be subject to double the fine.

To prevent construction zone injuries and fatalities, WORKSAFELY™ recommends the following driving tips to maintain driver and worker safety:

- Know the work zone signs
- Slow down and pay attention to other drivers
- Stay focused. Avoid distraction
- Expect the unexpected
- Keep your cool. Be patient
- Plan your route to avoid construction zones

"My advice to fellow flag persons and road workers: Hang in there," Stangl advises. "Flag persons are, in most cases, essential for work to be completed safely, but also the first person the public sees when they enter a construction zone. Ultimately, we would like for the motorists to remember that everyone working in a construction zone is someone's loved one."

"They deserve to go home safe to their families!"



“The easier you can make the movement of motorists through a work area, the safer it is for everyone.”

– Todd Turner, General Manager of E.F. Moon Construction

Pictured: Jorian Stangl, Maple Leaf Construction photo