

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Close calls in Kansas work zones put lives at risk

During National Work Zone Awareness Week, April 26-30, the Kansas Department of Transportation reminds motorists to drive safely. Lives depend on it. Here are accounts of two close calls in roadway work zones:

“It was pretty intense.”

The crash happened one afternoon this past July. A KDOT crew on U.S. 83 outside Liberal had set out signs alerting northbound motorists to be ready to stop for road work.

But one pickup truck driver didn't pay attention.

On a highway with a 65-mph speed limit, he somehow missed all the work-zone warning signs. He somehow didn't see the flatbed truck halted in his lane in front.

That day, KDOT Equipment Operator Daniel Zuniga Jr. had the job of signaling the traffic to stop. He got the flatbed truck to stop while he stood on the shoulder and held a STOP paddle for approaching motorists to see. Zuniga then started to walk from the shoulder past the front of the idling flatbed truck to position himself at the centerline so other vehicles could better see him.

As he recalls, no tires or brakes squealed before he heard a huge crash, the instant the pickup rammed the back of the stopped flatbed truck. The impact shoved the flatbed truck forward -- to about 5 feet from Zuniga.

As the smashed flatbed truck catapulted toward him, Zuniga froze. He leaned away. It played out “like a movie,” he said. An older man kicked the passenger door of the flatbed truck open and gasped for air. The driver of the pickup that crashed into the flatbed “came out hollering,” cussing, his arm and wrist mangled.

“It was pretty intense,” Zuniga recalled. He remembers feeling shaky. “At that time, I was in shock -- the fact that had happened and it was so close to hitting me. I was still in the path of it.”

So every time he sets up in a highway work zone, he remembers how close it came. When he flags down cars now, he said, “I’m really alert.”

He and his co-workers notice driver after driver passing them in work zones, phones out, distracted.

“He’s coming right for you!”

It was the afternoon of New Year’s Eve, about 20 years ago. Equipment Operator Ted Coleman was on a crack seal job on northbound I-235 near Kellogg. To direct traffic away from the work zone, the crew had set up cones along a half-mile-or-so stretch.

Coleman had to get under the crack seal machine, set on a trailer, to unplug a pipe.

While under the machine, his legs stuck out in the closed lane.

Then he heard someone yell: “Ted, watch out! He’s coming right for you!”

Instead of staying in the open lane, a car sent traffic cones flying in every direction along its path. Coleman had just enough time to glance toward the oncoming threat, not enough warning to slide out from under the trailer. All he could do was tuck his legs in under the trailer and brace for impact.

The car veered in time to miss the trailer by 2 feet. His legs could have been run over if he had not retracted them.

Coleman felt angry. The driver knocked over about 150 cones. Someone reported the incident, and Coleman heard that the driver was arrested later, suspected of DUI after a crash at another location.

Now, when Coleman, Wichita East Subarea Supervisor, briefs his crew every morning, he reminds them that in a work zone, “You guys have to have the buddy system; you guys have to watch out for each other out in the field.”

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