

Workers recount near misses on highways; urge motorists to pay close attention in work zones

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A night-time crash earlier this year on the Turner Turnpike nearly cost two Oklahoma Turnpike Authority employees their lives.

Jeremy Smart and Kenny Baker recounted their near-miss in a work zone when Oklahoma Transportation and Oklahoma Turnpike Authority employees gathered Friday morning at ODOT's Oklahoma City headquarters to share a moment of silence and hear the names of the two agencies' 72 fallen workers be read by transportation executives. This ceremony was the final event of a two-week work zone safety awareness campaign titled "Safety: It's Not Just About You."

Baker was directing traffic off the Turner Turnpike at the Stroud exit the night of Jan. 27 while emergency personnel worked to remove vehicle debris from a crash during a snow storm. Smart sat down in his pickup, which was blocking a lane, to make a phone call to his crew waiting for him to head back to the Kickapoo Turnpike.

Suddenly, Baker saw a semi-tractor trailer pull around the line of vehicles waiting to exit and pick up speed in the lanes blocked by two OTA pickups to protect workers who were removing vehicles from the earlier crash.

"I kept thinking he was going to stop. He had come around to pass all the people getting off. He apparently didn't see me with my flashlight or our vehicles (with flashing lights). He got up on us quick. The only thing I knew to do was to scream and tell Jeremy to get out of the truck," Baker said.

"I just happened to have my door open and I hear Kenny yell, 'Jeremy, get out! Get out! Get out!'," Smart said. "I could hear his voice — it was serious."

Both men jumped over the center median barrier wall to safety with seconds to spare. "I saw my truck get annihilated going down the highway by a semi that never slammed on his brakes, never touched the brakes or anything," Smart said.

Things happened so quickly that at first Baker was unsure whether Smart had made it out of his truck in time. "I was just glad to see him over there," Baker said.

Others on scene also initially thought the worst. "A guy working on another ramp had called my boss and said 'Jeremy and Kenny are both dead.' So, that's how close it was. If it wasn't for this guy right here, I'd be another name on that list (the fallen workers memorial)," Smart said of Baker. "I'm very thankful."



INFORMATION RELEASE

Oklahoma Transportation
Strategic Communications

200 N.E. 21st St

Oklahoma City, OK 73105-3204

@OKDOT www.odot.org

(405) 521-6000

ODOT employee Darin Manley shared a similar experience from March 24 on US-412 near SH-74 east of Enid.

The 19-year transportation employee and two co-workers were about to exit an ODOT pickup in the right lane where maintenance work was taking place. Another vehicle rear-ended the pickup at nearly 70 mph. The back of their vehicle had an arrow board and flashing lights to signal motorists to move over.

"It was kind of like being hit by lightning. Everything happened so fast. She was apparently watching a video on her phone. She didn't even see we were there and had her cruise control on," Manley said.

Luckily, the ODOT crew and the driver walked away without serious injury.

All three workers had a message for motorists.

"These are people, people who have families. If you see flashing lights, just slow down. Too many people are not paying attention and on their cell phones. There's plenty of distractions in our vehicles today. But be aware there's people working out on the roadway," Smart said.

Manley said his message to motorists is simple: "You owe it to yourself to not go speeding through a construction zone anywhere watching a video or doing a text message and possibly cause a work zone fatality. That's something you can never take back. You can never redo that day of your life. If there's something on that phone that's so important, you should pull over where it's safe and pay attention to your phone."

With more than 275 ODOT and OTA work zones planned for the summer construction season this year, Secretary of Transportation Tim Gatz said motorists suffer crashes and injuries far more often than workers, and that's why it's critical for all drivers to slow down and remain vigilant in work zones.

"Any crash that results in serious injury or fatality affects more than just the driver. The choices made behind the wheel can affect your family or someone else's family, friends and community forever," Gatz said. "We want everyone to go home safely at the end of each day and through a partnership between workers and drivers, we can accomplish that goal."

In the past five years, 91 people, including one ODOT worker, were killed and 1,455 people were injured in more than 8,000 collisions in Oklahoma work zones. Preliminary figures show 20 people were killed from January-September 2021 in work zones. Even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when traffic volumes significantly decreased, work zone fatalities did not lessen. Nineteen motorists lost their lives in work zones that year.

Learn more about work zone safety at <https://www.DriveSafelyOklahoma.com>.



Oklahoma Department of Transportation maintenance worker Darin Manley, left, and Oklahoma Turnpike Authority employees Kenny Baker, center, and Jeremy Smart, right, discuss recent near-miss crashes as work zone awareness weeks come to a close Friday. The workers urge drivers to put away distractions and slow down in work zones.



Oklahoma Department of Transportation Deputy Director Dawn Sullivan reads the names of ODOT's 61 fallen workers during a Moment of Silence ceremony for workers at the end of National Work Zone Awareness Week. She was joined by Secretary of Transportation Tim Gatz, right, ODOT Director of Operations Shawn Davis, left, and Oklahoma Turnpike Authority Deputy Director Joe Echelle, far left, along with OTA maintenance workers Kenny Baker and Jeremy Smart. Echelle read the names of OTA's 11 fallen workers.