

Six construction workers killed in highway accident in Baltimore County

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26 March 2023

Six construction workers were killed near Baltimore, Maryland, Wednesday when a car crashed into a work area in the median of the I-695 Beltway.

According to witness accounts and video footage, an Acura TLX was attempting to change lanes when it struck the front passenger-side corner of a Volkswagen Jetta. The impact caused the TLX to lose control and careen into a work zone through a gap in the concrete barriers that isolate the work zone from the rest of traffic.

“Crash Team investigators believe this caused the Acura to lose control and subsequently travel through the barrier opening into the work zone and overturned,” the state police press release said. “The construction workers were working in an active work zone on the left shoulder of the inner loop of I-695 in Baltimore County when the incident occurred.”

Maryland State Police identified the workers, who were pronounced dead on the scene, as Rolando Ruiz, 46, of Laurel; Carlos Orlando Villatoro Escobar, 43, of Frederick; Jose Armando Escobar, 52, of Frederick; Mahlon Simmons III, 31, of Union Bridge; Mahlon Simmons II, 52, of Union Bridge and Sybil Lee Dimaggio, 46, of Glen Burnie. All of the victims were Maryland residents.

The driver of the Acura, Lisa Adrienne Lea, 54, of Randallstown, was taken to a shock trauma center and is receiving treatment. The driver of the Volkswagen, Melachi Brown, 20, of Windsor Mill, was uninjured but stopped just north of the scene when his vehicle became disabled.

The report concludes, “Once the investigation is complete, the Crash Team will submit its findings to the Baltimore County State’s Attorney’s Office for review to determine whether charges will be filed.”

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)

announced that it was sending two investigators, particularly focusing on “issues related to speeding, work zone protection for construction workers, and collision avoidance technology.” The NTSB said it expects to have a preliminary report in three weeks, but the final report will take one to two years to complete.

The workers were converting the breakdown lanes into travel lanes as part of a \$461 million project initiated by Maryland state government to relieve congestion. The project also involves rebuilding the I-70/I-695 interchange and extending express lanes on I-95 from White Marsh to Route 24 in Bel Air.

Construction zones are common on the highways around Baltimore. The current project comes on the heels of another operation started in 2015 and recently completed to widen a section of I-695 just south of the accident site.

Work zones are almost always accompanied by well-marked speed restrictions and speed cameras. But there were no signs posted for a reduced speed limit visible the day after the crash, and it’s not clear from footage if a speed restriction was in place. Nearby construction zones have considerable signage and are difficult to ignore.

Dimaggio’s husband, George Drum, told the *Baltimore Sun*, “The thing I can’t get over is she was terrified of that job site.”

Gerald Ullman, a senior research engineer at Texas A&M Transportation Institute who has done research specifically on work zone intrusion crashes told the *Sun*, “The odds of something—somebody who’s lost control—getting right into that small area is, you know, very, very unlikely,” characterizing the accident as “one in a million—or even one in a billion.”

He noted that the footage of the crash shows a barrier truck present, but moved out of the way, creating a gap

where the car could enter. Placing a barrier truck upstream from workers is a common practice to absorb much of the energy from a potential crash, rather than allowing a vehicle to strike workers directly as it seems happened in this case.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 2003 and 2020 over two thousand workers have died at road construction sites, an average of 123 per year. Motor vehicle crashes in general caused 38,824 deaths in 2020 and 42,915 deaths in 2021.

This current accident comes just two months after the US Department of Transportation announced a campaign to reduce highway traffic deaths. United States Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said, “Today we are issuing a national call to action and asking all Americans-including private industry, non-profit and advocacy organizations, and every level of government to join us in acting to save lives on our roadways.”

However, the plan has the same character as the pro-corporate infrastructure bill previously promoted by the Biden administration. As the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, demonstrated, the US government is unwilling and unable to take serious action to improve transportation or workplace safety when it impinges on corporate profits.



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