

Construction Sector United in Fight Against COVID-19

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As the provincial government announces a phased recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic under BC's Restart Plan, many sequestered businesses and workers may be facing a reopening with a mix of optimism and concern about working safely. Declared an essential service by the provincial government, BC's construction industry has been working through the pandemic, developing and improving safety practices and protocols that demonstrate that businesses can work safely, even as they face unfamiliar challenges.

When a public health emergency was declared in the province on March 17, little was known about COVID-19. Industries and services considered essential started off in the same place, understanding the general health threat posed by the coronavirus, some of the ways in which it causes infection, and some of the strategies that were already working to slow its transmission.

As an essential service, the BC construction industry understood its responsibility to the province, continuing to build essential infrastructure to serve its people, ensuring that construction projects already underway were taken to a point where they were safe and secure and ensuring that the core of the province's economy continued to operate. Given an opportunity to retrench or move forward, many construction companies and their workers continued to report for work voluntarily.

The primary concern of construction industry employers was the health and safety of its more than 220,000 workers, including the 183,000 tradespeople who can't work from home. Yes, it was scary at first. But the industry pivoted quickly to developing new safety practices and protocols from the ground up, not only to protect workers and their families, but to demonstrate that the industry could work safely through the pandemic without straining government health resources.

Physical distancing became the new normal as workers were deployed to maintain the strict limits recognized by health authorities. Schedules were adjusted, splitting construction crews into day and night shifts where possible, maintaining productivity while increasing physical distance. As experts in personal protective equipment, the industry deployed facemasks for workers and established additional handwashing and hand sanitizing stations at worksites. Work crew transportation was limited to fewer workers per trip and a number of worksites introduced non-contact temperature screening to identify possible symptomatic carriers. Construction workers were also assigned to isolated work "pods" in which they would only work with a small group of workers each day. If any worker believed they were infected, only the workers in that pod needed to self-isolate.

Innovation was key to completing everyday jobs. For example, how do two workers cooperate to hang a door that measures five feet across and still achieve the goals of physical distancing? A forced air respirator proved essential to completing the task for one work team.

Companies shared their hard-won safety knowledge with each other, with industry associations, and with jurisdictions across the country. We worked closely with WorkSafeBC to establish new protocols and educate employers and workers on what they needed to do to work safely.

The construction industry's response has not always been perfect, but it has been successful to date. So far, no outbreaks or clusters have been reported, and as of May 13, WorkSafeBC has recorded only one incident of a construction worker contracting COVID-19 on a job site.

But we also recognize that the job isn't finished. The construction industry will continue to adhere to these critical safety measures and adapt and improve them as new information comes to light.

As BC positions itself for a phased re-opening over the next 18 to 24 months, the construction industry provides a template for doing so safely. We offer our hard-won knowledge as a resource so that we can work with other businesses and industries to lead an economic recovery — with a mix of optimism, caution and expertise — together.



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