

Maximizing COVID-19 Safety on Construction Sites Through EFFECTIVE DOCUMENTATION

By Stefan A. Borovina

Reopening and rebuilding the construction industry in the wake of the pandemic has brought new challenges in keeping jobsites safe. To prevent COVID-19 exposure and transmission, practices such as physical distancing, wearing face masks, handwashing and site disinfection, which were practically unheard of a year ago, are now a way of life.

It almost goes without saying that it is in a contractor's best interest to take COVID-19 safety just as seriously as all other aspects of construction safety. First and foremost, workers are entitled to a safe work environment, and employers are responsible for providing it. Workers have the right to feel confident that their employer is reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 as much as possible. Beyond this, however, an outbreak has the potential to shut down a project just as quickly as any other serious safety issue. Additionally, the failure to follow the COVID-19 construction guidelines set by local municipalities can result in a stop work order or citation in the event of an inspection.

Contractors looking to thrive in the construction industry's new normal can maximize COVID-19 safety on their jobsites and streamline their safety policies by documenting their policies, procedures and important information on a construction project. This article discusses some best practices in using effective documentation to this effect, for the benefit of contractors, workers and the project as a whole.

Safety Plan

Of all the COVID-19-related documents used on a jobsite, the safety plan is likely the most important. Many municipalities such as New York City require a written, site-specific plan for each jobsite as a condition for any active construction sites. Even if it is not required, a written safety plan enables contractors to have a clearly defined procedure for keeping workers and the workplace safe so that construction work can continue. Another best practice that contractors can follow, required in New York City, is to conspicuously post a safety plan at each site. A safety plan in plain view for everyone to see helps promote the culture that COVID-19 safety is taken seriously. It also ensures that the site-specific rules are readily accessible, which will help make their enforcement much easier.

To be most effective, a well-written safety plan should address both the steps that will be taken to keep workers safe and practices that will make the workplace itself safer.

For example, the plan should provide rules on required physical distancing, proper face coverings, handwashing and the use of appropriate PPE. An effective safety plan should also contain procedures for how workers will be screened for symptoms, contact tracing, and the cleaning and disinfecting of the site in the event of exposure.

Contractors can look to municipalities and government agencies for examples to follow based on their requirements. New York State Department of Health (n.d.) provides one such template that contractors can adopt in whole or in part. This template provides an example of a safety plan that addresses the key COVID-19 safety considerations in a format that is readily adaptable from one project to another.

Communication Plan

While the safety plan addresses the specific COVID-19-related practices workers are expected to follow, the communication plan documents the methods used to provide COVID-19 safety information on the site. This plan should include any instructions and training delivered to workers and visitors about preventing virus transmission. For example, the communication plan can document how workers will be instructed to self-monitor for symptoms or how to practice effective handwashing. The communication plan can also include a list of signs and warnings posted on the jobsite intended to inform others about specific virus-related hazards.

Symptom Screening & Contact Tracing Logs

Having plans for both keeping workers safe from virus exposure and communicating important COVID-19 information are essential for a safe and well-run construction project. However, to manage the potential for exposure, it is equally important to keep track of the people who come onto the jobsite. This can be done through the proper use of both symptom screening logs and contact tracing logs. While the exact procedures for symptom screening and contact tracing can be addressed in the safety plan, construction projects should also maintain

dedicated logs for both procedures to track and manage this information.

A symptom screening log should serve as a daily accounting for each worker who enters the jobsite. This log should confirm that the screening procedure required by the safety plan has been followed for each worker. The log should also confirm that each employee has answered the screening questions and that the answers have been reviewed by the appropriate person(s).

A contact tracing log is broader than the symptom screening log in that it should include almost everyone who enters the work site, workers and visitors alike. Contact tracing will be necessary in the event of COVID-19 exposure, so the document must be complete and accurate. The contact tracing log should list the name and basic contact information for every person who may have had close or proximate contact with others at the site. On larger projects, contractors can decide to exclude from the log outside employees who make deliveries to the jobsite. This should only be done, however, when the delivery was made using proper PPE or through contactless means.

Cleaning & Disinfecting Log

The cleaning and disinfecting log is perhaps the most basic of COVID-19 documentation, but it is just as important. The log is necessary not only to show that a standard procedure for sanitizing the jobsite is being followed, but also to show the specific response in the event of virus exposure. While the exact procedure for cleaning and disinfecting the site can be stated in the safety plan, a separate record should be kept for documenting cleaning and disinfecting. In its most basic form, this log should contain the date, time and scope of the cleaning and disinfecting performed, as well as the worker who performed the task. More specialized logs can also document the cleaning method or product used, as well as any worker notes or comments.

Effective Document Use

Simply using the documents described is not enough. To maximize their effec-

tiveness, these documents must also be complete, legible and accessible. For example, a safety plan that addresses potential virus-related hazards in a way that is easy to both read and understand is more likely to be effectively implemented than a document that is illegible and confusing. Similarly, a contact tracing log that legibly contains all necessary information will enable effective communication and precautions in the event of exposure at the jobsite. Accessible documents that are easy to locate and access are more likely to be properly filled out and referenced during a construction project. Document accessibility is also important in the event of an inspection by OSHA, a local buildings department or other agency.

To facilitate proper document use, employers can designate a specific person(s) responsible for the task. For example, the New York City Department of Buildings (2020) requires that at least one safety monitor be designated in the safety plan for each jobsite. The safety monitor is responsible for being available on site and ensuring continuous compliance with the safety plan and any other COVID-19 safety policies. The site safety manager can be a dedicated po-

sition or the individual can serve additional roles as well, such as the competent person.

Finally, documents can and should be streamlined to maximize their effectiveness and minimize any confusion or duplicity. General contractors can incorporate subcontractors in their documents, rather than having each trade keep its own. One set of documents is less complicated to keep track of and helps ensure that they are properly filled out. Having one set of documents instead of many also increases the likelihood that the documents will be stored together and thereby easier to access.

Conclusion

Managing COVID-19 safety and preventing exposure on jobsites will be part of the construction industry for the foreseeable future. COVID-19 safety practices will remain an integral part of overall con-

struction safety. The effective use of documentation will help ensure that these safety practices are properly implemented. This documentation will also be valuable in the event of potential virus exposure or an inspection by a government agency. **PSJ**

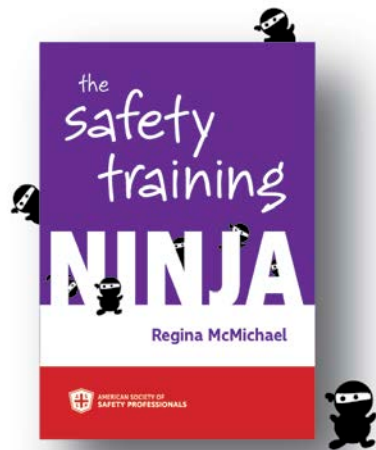
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