Guidance for COVID-19 and the Construction Sector

July 2020

The aim of this interim guidance is to help employers and employees understand how to work safely during the COVID-19 pandemic as businesses continue or restart operations. It is important for employers to ensure that employees can work safely and support workers’ health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, control measures and actions taken should be informed by an appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment – done in conjunction with workers and other relevant personnel. The risk assessment will help the employer to identify sensible measures to control COVID-19 transmission in the workplace. All businesses should demonstrate to their workers and customers that they have properly assessed their risk and taken appropriate measures to mitigate this. Further, these COVID-19 guidelines should be used as a complimentary guide to the OSH rules and should not be seen as a replacement of such.

Background

On 11 March 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19 as a pandemic. The majority of Caribbean countries have reported at least one confirmed case of COVID-19. CARPHA has assessed the risk of continued transmission in and to the Caribbean Region as Very High. The aim for all countries now, is to stop transmission and prevent the spread of the virus. Most countries in the region have implemented significant and effective measures in this regard. Border closures, implementation of social distancing norms, and the restriction of movement to essential personnel have helped to slow the spread of the virus. Notwithstanding, CARPHA urges continued efforts which will keep the Region safe.

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is the disease caused by the SARS-CoV 2 virus. The virus that causes COVID-19 disease (SAR-CoV-2) belongs in the same family of coronaviruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), 2002/03 outbreak (Reuters, CDC) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV), 2012 outbreak. This virus is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans.

How is it transmitted?
The virus can be spread by individuals from 2 days before and until 14 days after the onset of symptoms. Precautions must therefore be taken to prevent human-to-human transmission of the disease. Currently, COVID-19 has been shown to spread by:

- Large respiratory droplets often produced by coughing or sneezing which land on a person or surface and transferred to the mouth or nose
- Direct or indirect contact with infected secretions
- Body fluids (e.g., blood, sweat, saliva, sputum, nasal mucus, vomit, urine, or diarrhea)
- There have been some instances when airborne transmission of other coronaviruses was thought to have taken place through exposure to aerosols of respiratory secretions and sometimes faecal material
- The COVID-19 virus may be spread by individuals that exhibit no symptoms
- There is no evidence that COVID-19 is spread by water, mosquitoes, or food.

What are the issues?

Construction in the Region may take many different forms ranging from very small home projects (e.g. repair and renovation) to larger projects such as construction of houses and small buildings to mega-scale projects such as building of multi-storey complexes or road works and associated road-infrastructure development (e.g. bridges, overpasses etc.). The first issue is jobsite population density. Projects of different scales means that there is a large variation in the numbers of construction workers gathered in workspaces. The second issue is Jobsite commute. To get to the jobsite, workers sometimes commute in groups through a pick-up service, thereby creating a potential for virus spread within the vehicle(s). The third issue is that of support sectors. Construction (especially medium to large-scale) relies heavily on other sectors in manufacturing and retail to supply the necessary products and services required. This means that jobsites are often visited by supply deliveries that potentially expose workers to the COVID-19 virus. All the recommendations in this document are based on reducing potential infection with the COVID-19 virus though contact with airborne virus particles or contact with virus contaminated exposed surfaces.

Managing COVID-19 transmission risk to construction workers

Employers must manage COVID-19 transmission risk to construction workers that share the workspace in order to protect everyone’s health and safety. The following includes guidelines that can be used:

- Decide if any activities need to continue for the business to operate where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed
- Limit the number of passengers in the business vehicles (include leaving seats empty)

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• Retrofit transport equipment with necessary screens to reduce contact of drivers and passengers and mandate wearing of masks within the vehicles.
• Practice social distance within the vehicles (reduce the vehicle carrying capacity).
• Where possible - Limit the use of air-conditioning in favour of natural fresh air
• Keep the time where people are in close proximity as short as possible
• Use screens or barriers to separate people from each other
• Use back-to-back or side-to-side working (rather than face-to-face) whenever possible
• Use fixed teams/groups or partnering to reduce the number of persons each worker has contact with
• Assess if activity can be safely done if workers must work face-to-face for a sustained period with more than a small group of fixed partners
• Encourage physical distancing (6 feet or 2 meters) in all parts of the workplace including entrances and exits, break rooms, canteens and similar settings
• Stagger break times to avoid congestion
• Encourage workers to stay home if they are sick
• Encourage workers to report any safety and health concerns

**Hygiene: Hand washing, cleaning, disinfecting and sanitizing**

Important components in reducing the transmission of COVID-19 at the construction site include maintaining good personal hygiene, and regular cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing the facilities. The following guidelines can be used:

• Encourage respiratory etiquette, including covering coughs and sneezes
• Allow regular breaks for workers to wash hands and regularly clean hands
• Use signage to promote personal hygiene and awareness of good handwashing techniques. If workers do not have immediate access to soap and water for handwashing, provide alcohol-based hand rubs (60% - 80% alcohol (ethanol or isopropanol))
• Provide hand cleaning facilities at key places such as entrances and exits points
• Clean and disinfect portable jobsite toilets regularly
• Fill hand sanitizer dispensers regularly
• Disinfect frequently touched items (i.e., door pulls and toilet seats)

**On-site meetings and working off site**

The following guidelines can help to reduce the possibility of transmission of COVID-19 through face-to-face meetings and maintain social distancing during meetings:

• Personnel who can work remotely e.g. Engineers, architects and designers should be encouraged to limit their presence at the jobsite and use appropriate remote working tools as much as possible.
• Use floor signage to help people maintain social distancing in regular on-site meeting places

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• Reconfigure seating and tables to maintain spacing and reduce face-to-face interactions
• Monitor the wellbeing of workers who are working from home and help them to stay connected to those operating on site
• Provide equipment for workers to work from home safely

Managing construction workers on site
The nature of construction work makes it difficult for many workers to work remotely or from home. The employer can consider the following guidance:
• Consider who is needed on site and plan for the minimum number of workers needed to be on site to operate safely and effectively (workers deemed necessary to carry out physical work, supervise work, or conduct work to operate safely)
• Stagger arrival and departure times at work to reduce crowding into and out of the workplace
• Do temperature checks for all persons entering the jobsite. Anybody with a temperature of 38°C should not be allowed to enter the site.
• Provide additional parking or facilities to help people walk, or cycle to work where possible
• Limit passengers in corporate vehicles
• Reduce congestion, for example, by having more entry points to the workplace
• Provide handwashing facilities, or hand sanitizer at entry and exit points
• Reduce movement by discouraging non-essential trips within buildings and sites
• Reduce job rotation and equipment rotation, maintaining single tasks for the day
• Use signage (ground markings to control the flow of people moving on site
• Reduce occupancy of vehicles used for on-site travel and follow social distancing measures within the vehicles
• Separate sites into working zones to keep different groups of workers physically separated as necessary
• Provide and instruct workers to clean tools or equipment (e.g. alcohol-based wipes) before and after use if these must be shared
• Consult manufacturer recommendations for proper cleaning techniques and restrictions when cleaning tools and equipment

Managing customers and visitors on the construction site
In order to minimize the number of people on site, employers should consider the following:
• Encourage visits using remote connections or appointment system
• Limit the number of visitors at the construction site at any particular time
• Carefully plan the schedules for essential services and contractor visits to reduce interaction and overlap between people
• Explain physical distancing and hygiene to visitors on or before arrival to the site
• Encourage visitors to use handwashing facilities/hand sanitizer as they enter the site
• Provide signage at entrances to the worksite to remind the public and workers to maintain physical distancing
In-bound and out-bound goods
Avoiding surface transmission when goods enter and leave the construction site is important, thus employers should consider the following guideline for in-bound and outbound goods:

- Revise pick-up and drop-off collection points, procedures, signage and markings
- Minimize unnecessary contact at the security, yard, and warehouse
- Consider methods to reduce frequency of deliveries (order larger quantities)
- Have single workers load or unload vehicles where possible and safe
- Encourage drivers to stay in their vehicles when possible

Communication and training
Employers must ensure that workers have up-to-date information on COVID-19 measures and procedures. The following include guidelines on communicating with workers and training:

- Provide clear, consistent and regular communication to improve understanding and consistency of ways of working
- Use existing communication routes to provide up-to-date information to workers on new work procedures
- Use simple, clear messaging to explain guidelines (images, clear language
- Using visual communication (whiteboards/noticeboards, signage) to explain safe working practices around the work site
- Communicate approaches and operational procedures to suppliers, customers, etc.

Personal Professional Equipment (PPE) and facial masks
Personal protective equipment used at a construction site may include safety helmets, gloves, eye protection, high-visibility clothing, safety footwear and safety harnesses. Additionally, it may include respiratory protective equipment, such as face masks. Personal protective equipment is important to protect workers from health and safety risks including COVID-19. The following guide can be used

- Continue to use normal control measures, including PPE needed to protect workers from other job hazards associated with construction activities
- Train workers on how to properly put on, use/wear, and takeoff protective clothing and equipment
- Ensure that workers wear appropriate masks or face coverings over their nose and mouth while at the construction site

Scale dependency: The guidelines for small scale projects can be adjusted accordingly. The same principles will generally apply. These include a risk assessment, sanitation and hygiene, social distancing and wearing of face masks.

References


