



Responsible, safe construction site practices can guide Ontario industry through COVID-19 crisis

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VAUGHAN, ONT., March 24, 2020 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the construction industry has come together to release a best practice guide and urges all employers to follow it during this time of uncertainty so that construction can continue to operate safely.

“Safety has and always will be the industry’s top priority,” says Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON). “Site safety is the builders’ responsibility and they must work with sub-trades employers to ensure all on-site workers and work sites are safe.”

Patrick McManus, acting executive director with the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, adds: “With 400,000 people working in Ontario construction, everyone has a role to play in ensuring the safety of their colleagues, managers and the public – and there is simply no excuse for unclean, unsafe behaviour right now.”

The industry best practice guide includes seven safety recommendations developed by health and safety experts in Ontario’s construction industry and endorsed by labour and management representatives. They come from a document called “COVID-19: What you need to know about Health and Safety and Working On-Site.”

They include: 1. Maintain good personal hygiene (construction or not): Everyone should avoid touching their faces with unwashed hands. Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tissue and wash your hands often.

2. On-site Sanitation: This is paramount. All employers have an obligation to provide access to more handwash stations with soap and water, washroom facilities, commonly touched surfaces or areas (hoists, site trailers, door handles, equipment or residential units), and an increased cleaning schedule.

3. Practise physical distancing: Employers can stagger start times, breaks, lunches, total number of people on site and coordinate pinch points, including hoists and site trailers, to keep people safely apart (one metre away or more). Limit unnecessary on-site contact between workers and outside service providers – for example, cancel the coffee truck.

4. Communicate policies: Employers must ensure everyone on site has a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities in health and safety is essential. COVID-19 policies need to be posted and communicated to all employees, contractors and trades, including sanitization practices, ensuring physical distancing and how work will be scheduled.

5. Protect your family and roommates: On-site workers should wash clothes as soon as they get home.

6. Report illness: Everyone should notify their supervisor and call public health immediately if they experience cold or flu-like symptoms. They must go home and self-isolate for 14 days. When home, complete the self-assessment on the Ontario COVID-19 website and follow instructions, or call telehealth (1-866-797-0000), your local public health unit or your family physician.

7. Track sick workers: This will allow employers to better inform public health partners if issues arise on site. In addition, keeping health and safety representatives, the joint health and safety committee and trade union representatives informed will increase transparency and the flow of communication.

McManus adds: “As always, the Occupational Health and Safety Act allows workers to refuse unsafe work. This longstanding workplace protection has not changed.”

“As a new normal emerges and the construction industry adapts, we recommend a case-by-case and site-by-site approach to new and enhanced safety protocols, rather than a blanket approach to construction by officials.”

Lyll adds: “We are thankful that construction has been deemed an essential workplace by the provincial government. It is important to build homes for people, to ensure that our water systems are safe and that transportation systems are functional.

“This period of time has been unprecedented and unexpected. Notwithstanding, I am impressed how labour and management are dealing with this and cooperating. Construction is the province’s main economic engine, and the industry must continue to work together safely, and that can happen if everyone follows the industry’s outlined seven recommendations.”

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