

Industry stakeholders concerned about worker safety

By Andrew Macklin March 24, 2020

Construction industry and associations are expressing heightened concerns over the health and safety of crews still at work on sites across Ontario.

“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.”

Over the past few days, there have been an increase in concerns expressed from the construction industry over the concerns of crews on active sites.



“We thought that one of the main ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was to engage in physical distancing and social distancing,” said Mike Yorke, president of the Carpenters District Council of Ontario. “We find that there are a number of real pinchpoints on any construction project of a larger size. That’s the hoist, the lunch rooms, when people come in to the site and leave in the afternoon.”

Yorke suggests that there are solutions than can be introduced, such as staggering the times that workers report to the jobsite to avoid overcrowding at entrances and on hoists.

Phil Gillies, executive director of the Ontario Construction Consortium, had additional suggestions for how to improve worker health and safety.

“Contractors can take steps that would improve the situation on job sites, but it’s impossible to institute proper social distancing,” Gillies said. “Next steps? Restrict access to a site through one entrance where there is hand sanitizer, face masks, bottled water and paper towels. See that portable toilets are being properly and regularly serviced—if your supplier can’t/won’t do this, find one who will. On major sites where possible—take the workers’ temperature and check for other symptoms as they come in. And try to enforce a minimum distance between workers.

Some of the issues, such as the how sanitary onsite lunchroom and washroom facilities are, have been longstanding concerns of the construction industry. However, those concerns have been increased significantly as fears over the spread of COVID-19 continue.

“Hygiene, washroom facilities, having soap and water and hand sanitizer on the projects is a major concern for our members,” said Yorke. “That’s the feedback we are getting in terms of phone calls, what we are hearing back from workers, is that they’re expected to maintain a healthier environment, but it’s not being provided. [...] Now it’s at a crisis point.”

With jobsite needs not being made, many of the associations have called on the provincial government to shut down all construction sites for 14 days, even though they have just been recognized as one of the essential services exempt from the mandatory closure of any and all non-essential businesses in Ontario. Like other industries, construction workers have the opportunity to refuse unsafe work. Without a resolution to the issues surrounding sanitation and safe social distancing, construction sites could be deemed unsafe for workers.

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.”