

BLOG

Big Apple Building Again - Safely

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Jul 20, 2020

Construction sites that sat dormant under lockdowns for months are back up-and-running, albeit under a new and unprecedented set of safety measures. For an industry that relies on speed and coordination among multiple groups of specialized workers to make projects profitable, construction companies have adapted remarkably well to the challenges of the coronavirus.

New York City, where all projects deemed non-essential were shut down from late March to early June, has been a leader and model in how to get highly complex building projects back on track, while putting the safety of workers first.



Communication, Training, Respect

Most general contractors in New York have gone above the mandatory requirements put out by state government and the CDC. For starters, most have installed COVID monitors on job sites. They run temperature checks and have workers fill out daily questionnaire checklists. Masks are worn 100% of the time and social distancing is practiced even while wearing the mask.

Basic daily work routines have also been restructured with an eye toward minimizing person-to-person contact. These include new rules for lunch breaks and coffee breaks as well as recommending workers bring their lunch from home so they don't have to go up and down the elevator hoist. Sanitizing workspaces is essential. Construction companies are washing down tools in between use and cleaning restrooms and common spaces frequently.

On location, the number of personnel allowed in the elevator hoist is limited. Some jobs are splitting shift times to minimize the number of people on site and many jobs are starting earlier in the morning to ensure the split shifts can achieve the same daily work targets.

Sites that are completely outdoors are easier to monitor. On the heavy highway side of the business, for example, construction never really stopped, as it was deemed essential. They've been very adaptable to the new state guidelines and have added rules such as being 100% in masks, social distancing, and daily questionnaires.

The key to any construction reopening is communication, which can be difficult in the industry because of the complexity and speed with which jobs are done. But in the COVID environment, the industry is taking a considered step back and focusing on communication. That includes labor negotiations.

Training has always been essential in worker safety, whether it's protocol for handling asbestos or social distancing. New York's reopening has been successful because of the training, communication and respect the industry is bringing to the table.

Different States, Different Rules, Same Exposures

As we've seen across the country, businesses are reopening on different schedules, and construction is no different. In locations where construction never shut down and continues to operate under constantly fluctuating circumstances, companies need to be vigilant in following not just CDC and state guidelines, but all local regulations, whether by municipality, town or county.

Small business owners and subcontractors have also been impacted differently than large firms building skyscrapers in major cities. Projects in Kansas City weren't put on hold the same way they were in, say, Boston. Public spending is also an uncertainty right now and whether financing comes through for many projects has yet to be seen. A lot of public projects like hospitals have been put on hold, while others such as for the MBTA in Boston have been sped up.

Like any industry managing employees returning to the work environment, construction faces new exposures brought on by COVID. In addition to developing, implementing and enforcing safety guidelines on par with those of New York City, contract language in insurance policies will be an important issue going forward. We've already seen many carriers adding COVID exclusions. Companies are also grappling with whether or not to ask workers to sign waivers that release them from liability if workers contract the virus.

Now is the time to look closely at general liability and workers' compensation policies.

Want to learn more?

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