

# Dealing with COVID-19 in Construction

By Ted W. Sofis

This year, 2020, we have been challenged in a manner unlike anything we have experienced in America since the 1918 influenza pandemic that killed millions worldwide. The coronavirus (COVID-19) was identified in Wuhan, China, after initially being reported as a cluster of pneumonia cases in December 2019. Despite efforts to contain the virus, it rapidly spread to Italy and the rest of Europe and eventually the United States. As a result, on February 26, the first cases of COVID-19 began to appear in the Seattle, Wash. area. Acting rapidly, many state governors issued emergency restrictions and stay-at-home orders. Across America we all watched the coronavirus task force briefings and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's morning broadcasts, as the response unfolded in especially hard-hit New York. In Pennsylvania we were issued stay-at-home orders by our Governor Tom Wolf for all but life-sustaining businesses. Which resulted in Penn-DOT closing down construction projects. In the months that followed, state governors began to reopen their economies. With the return to work there are protocols and procedures we will need to follow to keep our crews safe and well. Below are some guidelines and information that I hope you will find helpful.

## INTENT OF PROGRAM

COVID-19 is an easily transmitted disease, especially in group settings. It is essential that positive actions be implemented to slow or stop the spread of the virus to safeguard the public safety. Construction is vital to our nation's economy. Recognizing this, we need to find ways to accomplish our work while not endangering our employees. This requires several precautions to protect our workers, their families, and members of the community. It is necessary that all businesses in the construction industry conducting person-to-person activities follow the directives and requirements of their state governments. Other local political units or privately owned companies may elect to impose more stringent requirements. In such cases we must adhere to the client or owner's requirements.

## Recommended Guidelines

- Follow all applicable provisions that your State government has provided for business safety measures.
- Requiring that every person present at a work site wear a face mask or face coverings.

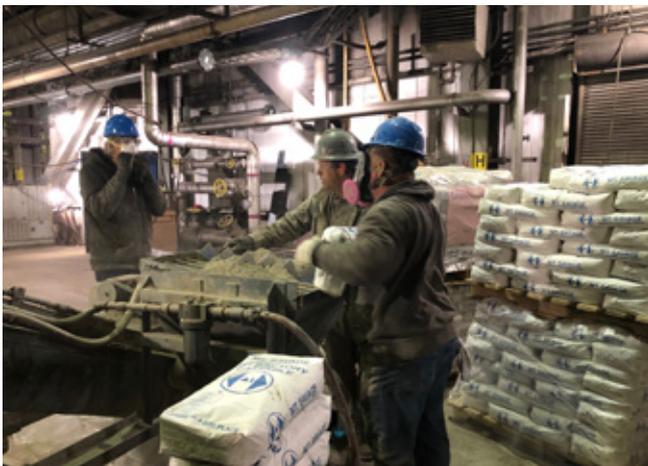


Fig. 1: Social distancing with mask inside



Fig. 2: Hand Sanitizer and Disinfectant Wipes



Fig. 3: Social distancing with mask outside

- Establish protocols for action to be taken when cases or probable cases of COVID-19 are discovered or whenever people in the company could have possibly been exposed to someone who may have the virus.
- Require social distancing with a 6 ft (2 m) minimum distance between workers, unless the safety of the workers makes an exception necessary, (for example, team lifting.)
- Follow other Department of Health (DOH) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance.
- Provide hand washing stations at appropriate locations on your job sites, such as building entrances, break areas, offices, trailers and job site egress areas.
- Implement cleaning or sanitizing protocols at all construction sites and projects. Identify and regularly clean and disinfect areas that are high risk for transmission. Establish requirements to clean common areas and regularly trafficked areas periodically.
- Ensure all gatherings are limited to no more than the maximum gathering size mandated by the state where your project is located. Maintain 6 ft (2 m) social distancing at all times when required to meet, even when meeting outside.
- Use virtual meetings and distribute information electronically whenever possible.
- Stagger shifts, work breaks, work areas, and different trades, wherever feasible, to minimize the number of workers on site.
- Limit tool sharing and sanitize tools or equipment if they must be shared.
- Employ jobsite screening based on CDC guidance to determine if employees should be working. Prohibit employees with any symptoms of Covid-19 from working. Encourage any sick employees to stay at home.
- Prohibit unnecessary visitors to any project or work site and limit the number of supplier deliveries.
- Limit access to enclosed spaces as much as possible.
- Ensure workers are traveling to and from the jobsite in separate vehicles. Whenever possible, make sure that they do not share a vehicle.
- Identify a Coronavirus Safety Officer for each project or work site, or (on a large-scale project) for each contractor or subcontractor at the site. The primary responsibility of the Safety Officer is to convey, implement and enforce the social distancing and other requirements of the company program for the protection of employees, suppliers, and other personnel at the site.



*Fig. 4: Face mask protection in close proximity*

Ultimately, as a contractor, I realize the difficulties involved in implementing and following coronavirus guidelines, while at the same time trying to efficiently perform and complete our projects. The reality is that we have no other option. This pandemic is so widespread and highly contagious that it forced the shutdown of our nation's economy for months. Nothing like this has ever happened before in our lifetimes. To ignore this, we jeopardize the lives of our employees and their families. For the safety of everyone involved and the communities where we live, we need to get through this together. A vaccine for COVID-19 will be developed and therapeutic medications for treating the virus will become available. In the interim, we need to find ways to be safe and productive. I hope that you find these guidelines helpful. More importantly, it is my hope that all of you and all of your employees make it through this construction season safely and in good health.



*Fig. 5: The respiratory protection worn during gunning operations fulfills the COVID-19 face mask directive.*



**Ted Sofis** and his brother, **William J. Sofis Jr.**, are the Principal Owners of Sofis Company, Inc. After he received his BA in 1975 from Muskingum College, New Concord, OH, Ted began working full time as a shotcrete nozzleman and operator servicing the steel industry. He began managing Sofis Company, Inc., in

1984 and has over 40 years of experience in the shotcrete industry. He is a member of various ASA committees and an ACI Shotcrete Nozzleman Examiner for shotcrete certification. Over the years, Sofis Company, Inc., has been involved in bridge, dam, and slope projects using shotcrete and refractory installations in power plants and steel mills. Sofis Company, Inc., is a member of the Pittsburgh Section of the American Society of Highway Engineers (ASHE) and ASA.