

Public Works Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As COVID-19 (Coronavirus) developments continue, Department of Public Works around the State of New Jersey are committed to the safety of their customers, volunteers, and staff. This requires a delicate balance between maintaining staffing requirements while simultaneously protecting those who are required to continue working. With this in mind, many Public Works Departments have taken a variety of steps to combat the spread of COVID-19, while continuing to provide essential operations. Whether your job can be done alone or requires close quarters contact with others, below is a list of recommendations based on what Public Works Departments are doing.

Creating Space

The first step in any comprehensive COVID-19 plan is to create as much space between people as possible. Whether it's reducing staffing in the office or physically creating more space for each employee, this can be undertaken in many ways:



Staggered Shifts - One of the most popular options, this idea seeks to establish alternating days or extra shifts that reduce the reducing density in the office, while also allowing them to maintain distance from one another while having a full onsite work week.

Teleworking - Telecommuting is a work arrangement in which some or all of the work is performed from home or another off-site location. In general, regular office hours are worked and deviations from that schedule require supervisor approval. This would eliminate the possibility of in-person contact in the office, as well as the risk faced while commuting using mass transit.

Rotating Employees – Some communities have initiated a rotating work week, their department into two teams that work in two week shifts. While one team works two weeks, the other team shelters in place for two weeks. For jobs that cannot be done without the necessary social distancing, this allows breaks for employees to rest and recover.

Reducing Contact on the job – Often times Public Works employees ride out in teams to a job site, but as a result of COVID-19, many departments are instructing workers to limit themselves to one person per car.

Limiting jobs that require close contact – Some tasks can't be done at all while following social distancing guidelines. Therefore some cities have begun to review all the jobs they have

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scheduled, and are merely delaying work on the ones that cannot currently be done while social distancing and fast-tracking those that can.

Personal Protective Equipment

No matter what administrative steps are taken to reduce or stagger staffing, employees will still come into contact with one another. As such, having ample supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is essential to maintaining operations safely. When selecting PPE, consider factors such as function, fit, decontamination ability, disposal, and cost. Sometimes, when PPE has to be used repeatedly for an extended period of time, a more expensive and durable type of PPE may be less expensive overall than disposable PPE.



Each employer should select the combination of PPE that protects workers specific to their workplace. Below are some steps that departments from around New Jersey are taking to keep their employees safe and workplaces clean.

Masks – Masks are considered to be the first and best line of defense against spreading the virus. Since the beginning of the outbreak, many departments have been using masks, most typically the N95 variety when available. Masks that can to be sanitized and reused are also only assigned to a person to the risk reduce cross-contamination. Disposable masks are readily available, and some have used them in conjunction with facial shields depending on the project.

Sanitizers & Wipes – Most departments have initiated the use of disposable wipes for heavily used equipment of office areas. Hand sanitizers are also made available in common areas. Disinfectants and sanitizing gels are also being kept in trucks for convenience. Remember, wipes and sanitizers should contain at least 60% alcohol to remain effective.

Disposable Gloves – Disposable gloves are a great way to limit your exposure. One of the most popular transmission methods for all viruses is high touch areas like door knobs, light switches, handles, countertops, and sinks. Some departments have begun putting up signs reminding employees not only to wear gloves, but to wear glove safely; this means remembering not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth while wearing them.

Cleaning Policies – Across the state, departments are working to decontaminate offices every day, with particular focus on common areas like restrooms and break areas. Trucks and equipment are also wiped down each time they are used.

Remember, employers are obligated to provide their workers with PPE needed to keep them safe while performing their jobs. The types of PPE required during a COVID-19 outbreak will be based on the risk of being infected as well as the type of job being performed, but a good rule of thumb is to always err on the side of caution and over prepare when possible.