The majority of America was closed in April. Orders to shelter in place or stay at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic trickled down from the federal to the state to the neighborhood level. In the workplace that meant if your job was not considered essential by some sort of state order, you were often being asked to work at home or take a leave of absence. Luckily for all of us, the construction sector was for the most part considered essential, and the brave men and women in those crews (although smaller and working slower) were still building and repairing our nation.

Of course, not all states considered construction essential in April, and even states that did were sometimes contending with localized restrictions that could stop or change ongoing construction work. As of press time in late April, Washington, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont and New Jersey did not consider construction work essential for a variety of reasons. Regardless of your location, everyone’s business was being affected. One of the biggest voices in the industry, Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), shared member survey data throughout April that showed project owners were halting or canceling current or upcoming projects and that contractors were furloughing or terminating workers at a concerning rate because of it. Yet, the construction industry wasn’t struggling as much as some industries, partly because safety has long been a cornerstone.

“I think one of the reasons that we were successful in getting the Department of Homeland Security and so many local officials to agree that construction should be able to continue is because construction has a history and a long proven track record of complying with complex safety rules,” said Brian Turmail, vice president of public affairs and strategic initiatives at AGC. “While we’ve had projects where individuals have tested positive, unlike other businesses that have continued to operate, we haven’t seen, knock on wood, that kind of jobsite-wide outbreak that you’ve seen for example in the meat packing plant in Sioux Falls, S.D. The anecdotal information tells us the safety procedures our members are living up to.”

“We’re not just talking about protecting workers. We’re talking about protecting their family and their neighbors and their community. It’s a huge responsibility which our members are living up to.”

— Brian Turmail, vice president of public affairs and strategic initiatives at AGC

Starting a COVID-19 Response Plan

First off, let’s all agree that this article does not contain your COVID-19 Response Plan. That’s because every operation is different, and each business must create its individualized preparedness plan. This article is supposed to point you in the right direction, confirm steps you’ve already taken and help showcase how big national contractors and organizations are handling the situation. To help all of us out, Associated General Contractors of Minnesota has pulled together the best eight-page worksheet on COVID-19 recommended “best practices” for construction jobsites we’ve seen. Why is “best practices” in quotes? “We wanted to be careful of assembling something that was viewed as sort of an industry standard because every company’s sophistication is different — every project is different,” explained Tim Worke, CEO of AGC of Minnesota. “So, we were very strongly focused on best practices versus here’s the standard because a lot of firms are going to exceed a standard, and there are some that are just going to do enough to meet the standard.”

AGC of Minnesota’s breakdown of COVID-19 best practices for construction companies is housed in two places — its website at agcmn.org/safety/covid-19 and at worksafe.agc.org — a national AGC website dedicated to helping workers stay safe with the pandemic looming. First off, the Minnesota AGC chapter encouraged contractors to develop a COVID-19 Response Team, COVID-19 Response Plan document (available on all worksites) and a renewed Safety Committee with a special focus on COVID-19.

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As with any successful safety initiative, it’s essential the communication flows both ways,” explained Chad Hart, corporate safety director at Choate. “First, we immediately developed a task force of individuals from all disciplines in the company to meet virtually every 48 hours to understand what was needed, discuss updates, what was and wasn’t working and plan accordingly. Out of these meetings, our preparedness plan developed.”

The basics of Choate’s COVID-19 preparedness plan are also housed at workingsafe.agc.org. The document is the perfect starter piece, breaking down prevention into five major steps, full of great graphics and simple text so you can actually tape it up on a wall as a constant reminder.

“Normally we prefer community-driven jobsite gatherings to deliver important messages, but we instead divided and conquered, ensuring our message could be well received on an individual level,” said Hart. “Posters, banners and other materials were created, including informative pictograms to avoid language barriers and communicate critical actions to prevent the virus’ spread.” You can download it at workingsafe.agc.org, and here’s a quick summary of those basics.

1. Social distancing: workers stay 6 ft apart; meet outside if possible; avoid confined areas; no communal food; reconfigure meetings and eating areas with the 6-ft rule; encourage the use of social tools to meet; consider additional satellite eating areas outside of the work area onsite; and sit adjacent to each other rather than directly across.

2. Personal hygiene: wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water; avoid touching your face; frequently sanitize tools, machines and personal protective equipment (PPE); avoid sharing tools and PPE; and utilize alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol.

3. Enhanced jobsite cleaning: work areas and common touch areas need to be cleaned on a regular basis, several times a week. This includes things like door handles, light switches, microwaves, copy machines, stair handrails, restrooms, trailers and construction equipment handles and cabs. Also, increased handwashing stations should be put on all worksites. Disinfect all portalets with a bug sprayer filled with bleach and disinfectant/degreaser.

4. Jobsite entry: Make your employees ultra-aware that they should not be entering the jobsite if they have a fever over 100.4 degrees, shortness of breath or a cough. Contractors can also administer temperature check operations on project sites.

5. Travel restrictions: Avoid unnecessary travel and utilize virtual meeting tools instead.

Digging Deeper into COVID-19 Preparedness

Those five steps are just the beginning for Choate. Each step in a COVID-19 plan can be broken down into an impressive list of practices and protocols on your specific job site. Let’s round back to AGC of Minnesota’s breakdown of these essential skills to their families. The last piece of the puzzle is recognizing positive achievements and top performers with our gratitude for doing their part in keeping us all safe. Choate’s OneLife safety identity — to protect your life and your legacy — is fully embodied during this time.”

Physical Meetings & Safety Awards

“We are holding smaller but more frequent safety meetings, which are held outside, while maintaining social distancing and CDC recommendations,” noted Chad Hart, corporate safety director at Choate. “We are using these meetings to drive home what is in our preparedness plan, while also focusing on how employees can take these essential skills to their families. The last piece of the puzzle is recognizing positive achievements and top performers with our gratitude for doing their part in keeping us all safe. Choate’s OneLife safety identity — to protect your life and your legacy — is fully embodied during this time.”
You demand a machine that packs a punch, and the NEW RT-50 Posi-Track® delivers. Featuring an industry-leading performance-to-weight ratio, it is easily hauled behind a 1/2-ton pick-up, giving you maximum mobility on top of class-leading power. No matter the job, do more work in more places than you ever thought possible with the RT-50.

COVID-19 best practices for construction companies. With its permission, we have compiled only one section of its best practices, but there is so much more online (agcmn.org/safety/covid-19). Let’s tackle personal cleanliness and hygiene. The chapter recommended employees clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 to 95 percent alcohol. It’s also pushing these practices:

- Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace. Ensure that adequate supplies are maintained. Place hand rubs in multiple locations or in conference rooms to encourage hand hygiene.
- Do not share tools or any multi-user devices and accessories such as iPads, laptops, radios and computer stations.
- Limit the exchange/sharing of paper documents by encouraging use of electronic communication whenever possible.
- Do not share personal protection equipment (PPE).
- Sanitize reusable PPE per manufacturer’s recommendation prior to each use.
- Ensure used PPE is disposed of properly.
- Utilize disposable gloves where appropriate; instruct workers to wash hands after removing gloves. Disinfect reusable supplies and equipment.
- Identify specific locations and practices for daily trash such as paper, hand towels, food containers, etc. Instruct workers responsible for trash removal in proper PPE/hand washing practices.
- Provide routine environmental cleaning (door knobs, key-boards, counters and other surfaces).
- Do not use a common water cooler. Provide individual water bottles or instruct workers to bring their own.
- Utilize shoe sanitation tubs (non-bleach sanitizer solution) prior to entering/leaving jobsite.
- Instruct workers to change work clothes prior to arriving home and to wash clothes in hot water with laundry sanitizer.
- Instruct workers leaving the jobsite because of illness to collect their personal possessions before exiting the worksite.

Reconfigure break spaces to allow social distancing of 6 ft and clean and disinfect break tables at the end of a break.
What Happens if Someone Gets Sick?

It is inevitable. We all get sick, and our family members will all get ill at some point, so what can contractors and job site staff do to control sick employee situations? Let’s say an employee or subcontractor gets sick but does not exhibit symptoms of COVID-19. That person should go home, seek medical care and get tested for COVID-19 if necessary. If that employee or subcontractor tests positive for COVID-19, that person should stay home, seek medical care, inform their supervisor, remain out of work for 14 days from the date of the last positive diagnosis and should not return to work until cleared by the company.

Also, if that employee or subcontractor tests positive, Marrillia then kicks in another set of protocols for COVID-19 exposure. The Marrillia president notifies the project owner, quarantines all employees whose workspace is within 6 ft of the sick employee, including those with prolonged close contact (more than 2 minutes) for 14 days. Marrillia will then clear and disinfect the workspace of its sick employee, per the company’s safety plan. Then, Marrillia will continue advancing the project.

Marrillia will continue advancing the project. Just reading a list like that, of course, puts everyone on edge. Stress and mental health on the job and at home are being tested like never before, so it’s also very important for contractors to consider the emotional well-being of employees. AGC has released a Culture of CARE tip sheet — Maintaining a Culture of CARE During COVID-19 — that will help contractors retain their cultures and values. Tips include an emphasis on reinforcing zero tolerance rules for harassment and maintaining a connection with employees despite physical separation.

“We haven’t experienced a pandemic of this scope or related economic shutdown of this scope in 100 years, so no one’s been through this,” said Turmail. “These are stressful times for a lot of folks. You know, their kids are at home, going to school on computers. They only visit restaurants. Their friends in other industries are out of work. It’s stressful. So firms should make sure they’re taking time to have one-on-one check-ins with their teams to make sure they know that they’re appreciated and most importantly, making sure they know that when they’re at work, their safety is the top priority. Because we’re not just talking about protecting workers. We’re talking about protecting their family and their neighbors and their community. It’s a huge responsibility which our members are living up to.”

Keith Gribbins is publisher of Compact Equipment.