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SAFETY COMMITTEE NEWS BULLETIN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CONSTRUCTION SAFETY COUNCIL

Infectious Diseases on the Jobsite

By: Robert Lahey, Construction Safety Council

The past two years have witnessed an increase in awareness about the risks - and tragedies - associated with a public health crisis. The impact has been monumental and measurable in so many ways. How ironic that the hazard we cannot see can have such a widespread and long-lasting impact on our economies, our cultures, and our lives.

So it goes with infectious diseases; sometimes the invisible can do the most harm. This is true both in the home and in the workplace. Construction jobsites are susceptible to three types of threats:

- Fungi spore-producing organisms that feed on organic matter
- Bacteria microscopic living organisms that can be found anywhere
- Viruses infective agents within living cells of a host organism

In the construction industry, exposure to mould (a fungus) is a primary concern. The prevention challenge is great, however, because mould is everywhere, including in the air, in soils, and in building materials. And while the environment will never be mould-free, residential and commercial projects should be free from visible and odor-producing mould. When inhaled or ingested, fungi presents a health concern especially to persons who are immune compromised.

Bacteria are living organisms that also are a threat to construction employees because they are contagious, most often by air (e.g., tuberculosis), water (e.g., Legionnaires' disease), and point-of-contact (e.g., tetanus). Preventative measures can be implemented on jobsites to reduce these risks of infection. However, even in the most active of work zones, these threats are highest to those with compromised immune systems.

Unlike bacteria, viruses are not living organisms, but they still present a significant risk to workers via bloodborne or airborne exposure. COVID-19 is the most common present-day example, but not the only one of this kind of infectious disease. Others include influenza, measles, polio, hepatitis, and rabies. Due to the communal nature of construction work and the reliance upon close, personal interaction, the threat of virus infections is real - and ongoing - especially for "novel" (i.e., new) strains, such as the coronavirus.

So with these threats ever-present, what is an employer to do to protect employees? After all, the federal law that requires businesses to provide a safe and healthful workplace is as important today as it was 50 years ago when OSHA was created as a governmental agency. A proactive approach by construction companies, large and small, can limit the risks inherent in their work.

It is essential for employers to implement protocols that govern personal hygiene, site safety, and use of personal protective equipment. A successful exposure control plan commonly includes these elements:

- Statement of purpose
- Definition of responsibilities of key personnel
- Identification of jobsite health hazards and risk categories
- Documented work procedures and practices
- Required engineering controls, administrative safety controls, and measures
- Frequent education and training
- Process of annual review

Most importantly, an exposure control plan must be customized to each specific construction work environment. This represents the most effective way to safeguard employees and enhance business productivity.

The Chicagoland Construction Safety Council, in partnership with PowerForward DuPage, offers a monthly four-hour training program on Infectious Diseases in Construction. Enrollment is FREE for IBEW Local Union 701 employers and employees. A schedule of events is available at www.buildsafe.org or call 708.449.8604 to request custom delivery of this no-cost training anywhere at any time.

PowerForward DuPage and the Construction Safety Council are pleased to partner in support of this continued effort to ensure that IBEW contractors and members Work Smart, Build Safe.

Robert Lahey is the President & CEO of the Chicagoland Construction Safety Council located in Hillside, Illinois. For more than 30 years, the Council has delivered programs and services in support of its mission to improve human safety performance through education and training. Learn more at www.buildsafe.org.

