

COVID from a Contractor's Point of View!

All NAXSA member companies have had their business impacted by COVID but as hard as it has been for many of us think about it from our customer's point of view, the contractor. Imagine you don't just have a static workplace to worry about but a transitory work environment where things change daily, different workers from many different employers show up as subcontractors, and a steady stream of vendors make ongoing deliveries with materials and rental equipment like trench shields.

How do you control the work site and still keep everyone safe? NAXSA reached out to Southern California based Construction Area HS & E Manager, Mrs. Reese Fortin with Sundt Construction, to get her take on just how tough this task is. Mrs. Fortin is a 2007 graduate of Fresno State University with a BS in Safety, who has successfully managed billions of dollars in construction projects in the fast-paced Southern California Market. Fortin is an employee owner of Sundt Construction Inc. that is known for an almost fanatical safety culture. Established in 1890, Sundt prides itself on not just a safety culture but building an organization willing to share best safety practices and to be transparent in the pursuit of overall industry safety. In addition to being one of the Southwest's leading General Contractors, Sundt is currently vying for it's Third Prestigious AGC Safety Excellence Award. The included pdf will connect you to a proprietary COVID-19 Exposure Scenario Matrix developed by Sundt and now shared with NAXSA members.

Mrs. Fortin points out that while managing the risks of the virus are paramount, many ancillary risks need to be considered while keeping the "essential" construction workers safe. The strain on families balancing stay at home duties, economic pressures from lack of household income, and social tensions from the COVID pandemic can make for a distracted workforce that is more susceptible to workplace accidents. The need to daily screen an everchanging workforce brings a third-party vendor on to many sites and presents a new set of problems keeping them safe and the work flow efficient. Also factor in to the mix a lack of scheduled huddled safety meetings that usually keeps daily job site safety top of mind. Workers also need to be constantly reminded to social distance both when working and even more so when taking breaks.

Many NAXSA outside sales reps are familiar with the need to attend onsite safety orientations on most of the larger construction sites and with these now limited to groups of 10 or less, scheduling and backups can become common. Fortin explains that Sundt has gone to an online orientation on many of their projects where workers can take the safety orientation on their personal devices at their own pace, all before coming on site for the first time. This allows workers to take the orientation in a socially-distanced location outside of a cramped project trailer where people are coming and going. Workers have shown solid retention of the material when quizzed upon arrival on site. Our project safety managers have much less paperwork to manage now that the process is online and are also getting exposed to less people in tighter quarters. Instead of occupying the indoor conference room all morning and managing piles of paperwork, our safety managers are engaging workers in the field and giving them a thorough greeting on their first day on site.

When asked about production through the pandemic, Fortin explains Sundt has been closely monitoring production rates, but it will take a little more time to evaluate the impact on jobsite productivity. She was pleased to say through the first 8 months of the pandemic, jobs are coming in on schedule and within budget.

So as a supplier to the ever-changing construction industry, what can we as NAXSA members learn from what our customers are going through, in short, a lot. Let's train our employees to be empathetic to our customer's needs. Let's follow their jobsite protocols, ask in advance what can we do to be prepared to expedite delivery of materials in and out of their sites. Let us teach our sales reps to think ahead before entering a site, that they have met the requirements and are not wasting their time or our customers. Let's be proactive and realize we are all in this together and by working together we will not only get through the pandemic, but we can use this to build a better relationship and be the best value add vendor in the shoring industry.