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Philadelphia's Commercial Construction Industry is
Tackling COVID-19 Response Head On. Together.

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Philadelphia Commercial Construction Industry Sets Precedent for Collaboration, COVID-19 Response

By Lauren Hanan, Director of Marketing and Communications, GBCA

While COVID-19 temporarily halted most commercial construction throughout Greater Philadelphia in mid-March, contractors and tradesmen and women on essential projects were among the first frontline workers challenged to create safe onsite environments in the face of the unknown.

"These contractors were still at their jobsites, confronting safety challenges and scenarios unlike anything we had ever seen," says Angela Hendrix, Director of Training and Workforce Development at General Building Contractors Association (GBCA), the Philadelphia chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America. "At the time, most cities and states hadn't yet experienced a rise in COVID cases, let alone a construction shutdown. Without peers elsewhere to learn from, we knew we needed to forge a path forward with other local leaders to keep everyone working safely."

The industry-wide collaboration and protocols that followed – designed to help protect every construction worker who steps foot on a jobsite or in an office – have been recognized nationally and offer lessons for all business leaders, regardless of their industry.

BUILDING STRONGER TOGETHER

As GBCA began aggregating COVID-19 safety protocols that could be implemented across the industry, the organization also brought together influential industry partners to centralize and strengthen COVID-19 safety efforts. The group included:

- **The GBCA Safety Committee**, a group that promotes workplace safety and supports the efforts of contractor members to maintain safe job sites
 - **The Building Trades Safety Committee**, part of the Philadelphia Building & Construction Trades Council, the umbrella organization for more than 50 member local unions that work in the construction industry in the Greater Philadelphia region
 - **Philadelphia Area Labor-Management Committee (PALM) Built-Rite**, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering cooperation among unions, contractors and owner representatives focused on improving safety, productivity and schedule discipline
 - **The Eastern Atlantic States (EAS) Regional Council of Carpenters**, a council of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, one of the nation's largest construction trade unions
 - **Med-Tex Services**, a leading provider of health and safety resources for the construction industry and one of GBCA's partners on safety
- "When it comes to safety, collaboration among the construction industry has always been incredibly important," says Francis Petriccione, Built-Rite program director at PALM who facilitates the Building Trades Safety Committee.

The Building Trades Safety Committee formed 15 years ago to bring together representatives from the building trades, contractors, local safety professionals and other industry partners. The



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committee was a driving force behind the industry's zero tolerance policy around safety measures for fall protection as well as other safety initiatives.

"What's key was that when COVID hit, we already had an established mechanism in place to discuss critical issues," says Petriccione. "We shifted from monthly in-person meetings to weekly virtual meetings, bringing together about 45 industry leaders who have a vested interest in the health and safety of the hardworking men and women out on the job. This was our big leg up in enabling us to work together versus working in silos."

In fact, when Rob Smith, Supervisor of Instruction for the Northeast Carpenters Apprentice Training Fund, who has been spearheading COVID-19 training efforts for the carpenters, learned of the joint protocols GBCA and the Building Trades Council were creating, he reached out to Hendrix at GBCA to team up.

"Given that carpenters typically serve as the superintendents on jobsites and are ultimately responsible for everyone's safety, we were working aggressively to create a training designed to help ensure every worker goes home healthy at the end of the day, even in the face of COVID," says Smith. "We also realized the clear benefits of having all trades and contractors trained to the same safety standard, so everyone is on the same page when it comes to protecting themselves and one another."

Smith was one of the professionals within a small group of experts close to the safety issues at hand that GBCA brought together in a working group to solidify industry-wide COVID-19 safety protocols. Each representative brought feedback from their respective position in the industry, and the group published the first version of its safety protocols in early April, just weeks after the pandemic began to take hold locally.

SETTING THE STANDARD FOR COVID-19 TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

"In a matter of weeks, the group put together a state-of-the-art program that every building trades member and contractor in the region, or anywhere in the country, could use," says Petriccione.

Detailing suggested best practices on worker personal responsibilities, health screening, social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE) and more – and synthesizing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state and local municipalities, the Mayo Clinic, Penn Health and others – these COVID-19 protocols were the foundation for one of the industry's most comprehensive COVID-19 awareness trainings available.

Smith and the carpenters also developed a related COVID-19 preparedness assessment. The assessment was validated by the City of Philadelphia's Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) as an acceptable certification for Pandemic Safety Officers, who L&I requires to be on every active jobsite.

"What we've created is a level playing field for safety among all tradespeople and contractors in Philadelphia," Smith says. "Whether individual members are educating themselves or they need to become certified as a COVID-19 Pandemic Safety Officer, the information and tools are readily available so we can all continue making safety a priority."

Setting the standard even outside of Philadelphia, the Carpenters International Training Fund shared the training and certification resources with members across the U.S. and in Canada in English, Spanish and French. The protocols were also listed

as a COVID-19 resource in OSHA's weekly email sent nationally to assist employers.

The COVID-19 online training and certification are available at no cost to all members of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, as well as to 22 other building trades, contractors and industry partners through GBCEA. To date nearly 40,000 individuals have taken the training and hundreds of Pandemic Safety Officers have been certified.

Leaders agree this collaborative COVID-19 response effort has been a proud moment for the industry.

"The fact that so many organizations had input and that we were able to talk through challenges made a process that could have been very cumbersome into something incredibly successful," Hendrix says. "I truly believe our safety protocols paved the way not just in our region, but across the country, for COVID-19 safety and health standards."

"There are so many different sectors that are still trying to figure out their way through the pandemic. Philadelphia is unique in that it is one of the few cities to see industry collaboration of this magnitude," says Smith.

Beyond the critical safety measures protecting thousands of people, the cooperation coming out of this initiative is the next best thing.

"Our collective pandemic response is absolutely a sign of greater collaboration among key players in commercial construction moving forward," says Hendrix. "The type of trust and rapport you have to build with industry peers to create recommendations and guidance that will keep

everyone working is on another level."

"Another silver lining of the pandemic is that we have demonstrated that following safety precautions works," says Hoyt Emmons, Senior Consultant at Med-Tex Services. "In an industry that continued essential work even in the early days, we haven't seen any work-related cases or cluster cases of COVID-19, showing that when everyone is committed to making safety a priority, we can protect ourselves and each other."

SHARING LESSONS FOR ALL LEADERS

Emmons, who serves as a health and safety subject matter advisor, also says this initiative offers lessons for leaders outside the construction industry charged with managing their organizations' COVID-19 response.

- **Forget competition. Focus on safety.** Safety shouldn't be a competitive advantage. There's power in putting rivalries aside and partnering with others who may be facing the same exact challenges to strengthen safety measures and keep teams safe.
- **Consider personal and occupational risk factors.** COVID-19 safety can't be one size fits all. Remember that everyone has different personal risk factors as well as occupational hazards depending on the nature of their work. For example, on jobsites, workers are not always able to be six feet apart from one another. These cases may call for wearing a mask and a face shield, while just a mask will suffice for someone who is able to maintain social distancing onsite. Construction is

also highly skilled and highly physical, meaning we need to be particularly mindful of the heat load we're putting on workers with PPE. Employers are responsible for protecting their people and they can't use a blanket approach.

- **Remember trust is a piece of the puzzle.** Ensuring people trust the source of information – specifically health and safety guidance – is key for adoption, especially in highly political environments. Enlisting the help of champions, being consistent and communicating clearly can go a long way in building credibility.

- **Rely on reinforcements.** Reinforcing safety measures needs to be done continually, and it isn't just a job for one person. While businesses may have a designated point of contact for all things COVID-19, similar to Pandemic Safety Officers on construction sites, natural leaders in the organization can also help effectively reinforce best practices.

- **Recognize success.** "I'm a big believer in recognizing success to keep people committed to safety," says Emmons. "Safety, especially when it comes to COVID, takes work on everyone's part, so when there is a win – large or small – we owe it to ourselves and our teams to recognize good work."

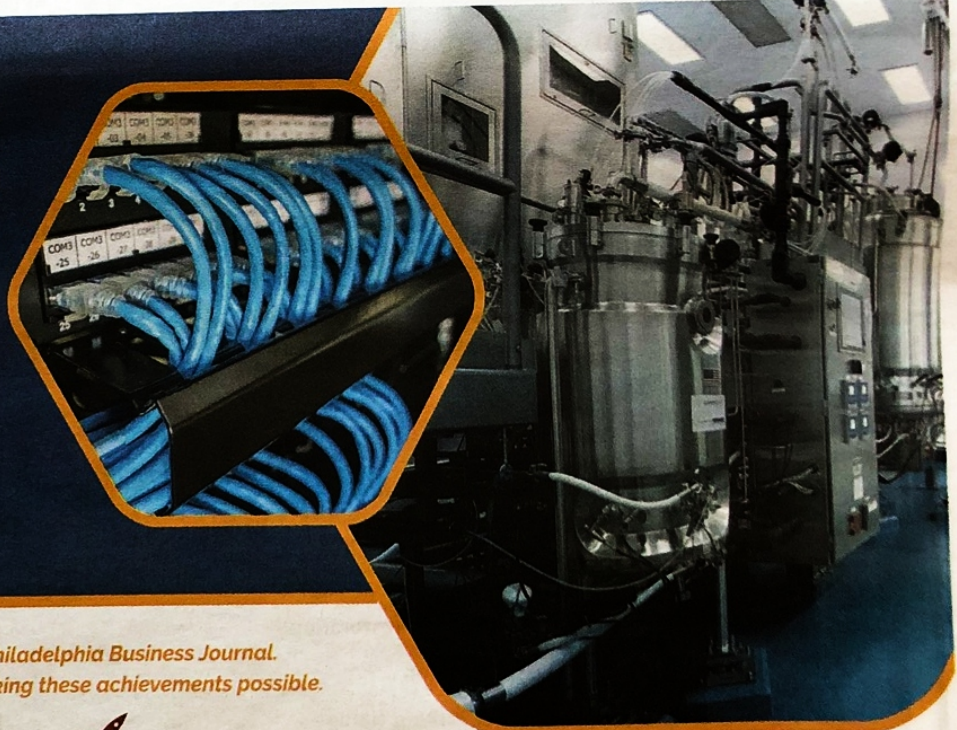
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