Infrastructure Health and Safety Association Guidance on performing powerline technician tasks during COVID-19 – Employer and Supervisor

Overview

During the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak, we all need to do our part to keep workers, customers and the public safe and healthy so we can stop the spread and prepare to reopen the province, when we are ready.

Below is a set of resources, tips and best practices to help employers and employees prevent the spread of COVID-19 and work together to reopen the province.

Employers and workers in Ontario have certain duties and rights under *the Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations. Employers should also review and follow any applicable directives and guidance coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Ministry of Health.

Learn more about:

- workers' rights
- employers' responsibilities

You should also regularly check for requirements applicable to your region, such as:

- the provincial COVID-19 Response Framework
- municipal bylaws
- orders from your local public health unit

To help prevent outbreaks, you are encouraged to develop a COVID-19 workplace safety plan. All businesses operating in a region in lockdown are required to have one under provincial regulation.

Report COVID-19 case(s) in the workplace to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

Best practices

Recognize hazards and assess risks: The first step to controlling risks in a workplace is to identify the risks. This applies to all workplace hazards, not just COVID-19. Identifying and controlling workplace hazards is required of all employers in Ontario under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and its regulations. The key risk factors for COVID-19 transmission include:

- prolonged exposure – spending more time with potentially infected people
- close proximity – working close to others
- crowded places – having more people in a space
- closed spaces – indoor spaces with less fresh air exchange (working indoors is riskier than working outdoors)
- forceful exhalation – activities that cause people to breathe more deeply, such as exercise, speaking loudly and singing

It is possible for COVID-19 to be spread by people who do not have any symptoms. This makes effective control measures very important. We must act as if everyone is infected when setting up controls.

The risk of severe health outcomes is not the same for all workers. The risk increases with age and is higher for people with certain medical conditions.

Potential exposures while performing powerline technician (PLT) work include:

- close contact (less than the recommended physical distance of 2 m/6 ft) with other personnel when riding in vehicles or when performing job tasks—either overhead or underground
- close contact with customers when addressing outage concerns or notifications
- handling materials and tools passed between crew members when performing job tasks
- handling materials obtained from stores or outside deliveries
- sharing the same facilities as other staff (e.g., washroom, kitchen, locker rooms, staff lounges, vehicles, shop areas, stores, work stations)

Controls:

Infection prevention and control measures prevent the spread of the virus by breaking the chain of transmission. For example, public health guidance includes staying at least 2 metres away from others which avoids close contact; washing hands removes the virus and prevents people from touching their faces with contaminated hands.

For COVID-19 in the workplace, it is recommended that employers and business owners conduct a risk assessment to determine the most appropriate controls and actions for a particular workplace/situation. Reference the IHSA's guide on the risk assessment process to help facilitate this and review Sample 1 and Sample 2 for examples.

Always start by considering the most effective controls first. It is best to begin by trying to eliminate the hazard – to remove it from the workplace altogether. Where that is not possible, use multiple engineering and administrative controls first to prevent the spread. Protective equipment (including personal protective equipment (PPE) and community protective equipment) should be relied on only where engineering and administrative controls do not sufficiently reduce the risk to workers.

In addition to the above recommendations, employers should determine whether PPE* needs to be part of their hazard control plan. The need for PPE should be based on a risk assessment taking into account environmental conditions and also take into consideration input from the local public health unit. Although proper use of PPE can help prevent some exposures, it should not take the place of other control measures. Note: If physical distance and separation cannot be maintained, workers should have PPE consisting of surgical/procedure mask and eye protection (goggles or face shield).

- Workers must use personal protective equipment as required by their employer.
- Workers should be trained on the proper use, care and limitations of any required PPE.

*NOTE: Please be reminded that most face coverings (non-medical masks) have not been tested to a known standard and do not constitute PPE. In some circumstances, face coverings may be used as an effective means of source control, but should not be viewed as an appropriate substitute for physical distancing in the workplace.

1. **Carry out legal duties and responsibilities.** Employers and supervisors are required by law to take every precaution reasonable in the circumstance to keep their employees safe. This includes making sure that the required safe work practices are carried out and the prescribed PPE is used or worn.
    - Ensure that workers are supplied with the prescribed PPE and have received proper instruction in the care, use, and maintenance of this PPE.
    - Advise workers to follow the manufacturer's guidelines and never share their PPE with fellow workers.
    - Workers have the right to refuse work if they believe their health and safety is at risk. If such a refusal is received, ensure the proper procedures are followed and alert the JHSC or HSR.
    - Ensure proper protocols are followed for all situations, including informing the JHSC or HSR of any health and safety concerns.
    - Ensure notifications from JHSC and other safety-related information are communicated to all workers on a regular basis (e.g., through electronic communications).
    - Create a dialogue with all staff involved about their physical and mental well-being. Stress at home and stress surrounding COVID-19 should not be dismissed, as everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Encourage fellow staff to make use of the company's EAP program as necessary.

2. **Screen for COVID-19**:
   Screening for COVID-19: guidance for employers | Ontario.ca
   This document provides employers with an overview of workplace screening for COVID-19 and information to help them make decisions about the use of rapid antigen screening.

   Screening helps keep infected workers and others from entering the workplace thereby reducing possible workplace transmission.

   - Question-based screening uses information about symptoms and exposures to identify people who may be infectious.
   - Rapid antigen screening is used to help identify people who are infectious before they develop symptoms.

   To further protect workers and help reduce transmission, workers who have passed screening must continue to follow all public health and workplace control measures including masking and maintaining physical distance.

3. **Ensure physical distancing is maintained.** This means keeping a distance of at least 2 m (6 ft) or more between persons. Physical distancing, as prescribed by government and health organizations, is the best way to prevent exposure and minimize the transmission of COVID-19.
   - Ensure the work site is large enough so that workers can practice physical distancing and members of the public can be kept at a safe distance.
   - Ensure workers are instructed in ways to maintain physical distancing from fellow employees, contract staff, or customers. Advise employees not to approach or enter a customer's premises unless absolutely necessary (e.g., an emergency situation arises).
   - Always enforce the recommended physical distance between workers and look for ways to change work processes and procedures to help workers maintain this distance.
   - If close proximity is required for a task, take extra precautions (e.g., PPE) to protect workers or choose the best option for maintaining physical distancing (e.g., use two trucks to perform the task as opposed to two PLTs in a double bucket truck).
   - Consider staggering work times/shifts to avoid crowding, or consider staggering work crews and reducing the number of work hours.
   - Consider dividing staff members into smaller groups (e.g., half on/half off rotation) and/or putting them in separate locations. This would help ensure that some staff is available to work should one crew or a facility become contaminated and have to be isolated.
   - Schedule breaks/lunch times at different times and locations.
   - Only assign tasks that are necessary to support and maintain the integrity of the system (e.g., trouble calls or emergency work).
   - Supervisors should perform all daily checks and safety/tailboard talks verbally only while maintaining the recommended distance between staff. Employers can create a temporary policy to allow for other methods of verifying attendance and understanding

of the communicated documents (e.g., supervisor can initial next to attendee's names to avoid using a shared writing implement).
- Establish a separate materials staging area to help workers maintain physical distancing and prevent cross-contamination of workers and materials.

4. **Minimize sharing of tools and equipment.** If these become contaminated with the virus, this will help limit the spread to other workers around the site.
    - Develop a plan to limit the transfer of tools, materials, and equipment between employees (e.g., change the work procedure or supply each worker with their own tools and equipment to use every day).
    - Ensure that enough cleaning supplies, materials, and PPE are available for the required tasks and to allow tools and equipment to be disinfected for the next shift. Advise workers never to share rubber gloves or their PPE.
    - Instruct staff to properly disinfect all trucks and equipment upon returning to shop area or reporting facility.
    - If possible, assign only one worker per vehicle when traveling to and from work sites in company vehicles. Assigning the same employee to the same truck each day would also help minimize the transfer of possible contaminants.
    - Ask staff to report any issues that require further attention to all necessary levels of management as soon as possible before leaving a facility to help ensure that proper intervention can be taken to prevent further exposure.

5. **Practice good hygiene.** Health Canada recommends the following basic hygiene practices:
    - Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds frequently throughout the day, or whenever you suspect you have been in contact with an infected person, piece of equipment, or tool.
    - If using hand sanitizers, they must be alcohol-based hand sanitizer, with 60-90% alcohol, approved by Public Health Ontario and Ministry of Health.
    - Sneeze or cough into a tissue and discard it in refuse container, or cough into your elbow or sleeve.

6. **Masks**: Learn more about using masks in the workplace including how to select, care for and use them to protect workers from COVID-19.

7. **Vaccines**: COVID-19 vaccines and workplace health and safety | Ontario.ca
   This guidance document explains how vaccines work to protect you when you are vaccinated, why COVID-19 workplace control measures need to be maintained even after workers are vaccinated, and some considerations for employers about workplace policies and supporting their workers to get vaccinated.

   Workplace controls are measures that employers use to help prevent workers from being exposed to hazards like those posed by COVID-19. Vaccines are a good complement to workplace controls, but cannot replace them. They have different purposes:

    - Workplace controls help prevent workers from being exposed to COVID-19.

- Vaccines help protect workers from getting sick if they are exposed.

To protect workers and help reduce the chance of COVID-19 transmission at the workplace, it is important to maintain workplace control measures even after vaccination.

Evaluate:
Changes to work procedures or practices related to COVID-19 may affect the way you have routinely managed other risks in the workplace. Thus, it is recommended that you consider the various preventative measures on an ongoing basis, and review and adjust accordingly if they are not working as intended or have created new risks or challenges.

Monitor your supplies. Check your supply of disinfectant wipes, products, and all PPE regularly to ensure you have sufficient supplies for the duration of an extended work shift (i.e., when a weather situation or equipment malfunction occurs, leading to an extended work period).

Tell staff to stay home if they are feeling ill. If workers begin to feel symptoms of COVID-19 while at work (fever, new cough, or difficulty breathing, etc.), they should immediately:

1. Isolate themselves from other workers and go home. If possible, avoid public transit.
2. Wash or disinfect their hands, avoid touching common surfaces and their face, and put on a facemask if one is available.
3. Advise their supervisor/employer and JHSC/HSR immediately so that proper procedures can be taken to prevent further exposure (e.g., notifying others who may have been exposed).

Stay in the know. Keep up to date with changing requirements. (See Resources below.)

Self-monitor for symptoms for 10 days after exposure.

Resources

Stay updated with daily government updates:

- **Government of Ontario**
- **Government of Canada**
- **Public Health Ontario**

Ontario government and agency-issued resources about COVID-19

Develop your COVID-19 workplace safety plan: Learn how you can create a plan to help protect your workers and others from novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19).
Workplace Safety Plan

The **Ontario Ministry of Health** is providing consistent updates on the provincial

government's response to the outbreak, including:

- status of cases in Ontario
- current affected areas
- symptoms and treatments
- how to protect yourself and self-isolate
- updated Ontario news on the virus

Public Health Ontario is providing up-to-date resources on COVID-19, including:

- links to evolving public health guidelines, position statements and situational updates
- synopsis of key articles updating on the latest findings related to the virus
- recommendations for use of personal protective equipment
- information on infection prevention and control
- testing information
- other public resources

Other COVID-19 resources

Health Canada outlines the actions being taken by the Government of Canada to limit spread of the virus, as well as what is happening in provinces and communities across the country. It also maintains a live update of the number of cases by province.

The **World Health Organization** is updating the latest guidance and information related to the global outbreak and spread beyond Canadian borders.

It also provides the most up-to-date information on:

- current research and development around the virus
- a COVID-19 situation "dashboard"
- emergency preparedness measures
- live media updates on the spread of the virus

This resource does not replace the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations, and should not be used as or considered legal advice. Health and safety inspectors apply the law based on the facts in the workplace.