The TTC's COR® requirement boosts jobsite health and safety

Contractors working for the Toronto Transit Commission's Engineering, Construction, and Expansion Group have seen their injury rates fall dramatically.

If you've looked into COR® certification over the past year, you've probably seen this statistic: COR®-certified businesses in Ontario have a lost-time injury rate that's 28 per cent lower than firms that do not have an occupational health and safety management system (OHSMS) based on COR®.

That finding came from a broad 2022 study by the University of British Columbia. Now, new numbers from one of Ontario's largest buyers of construction provide more evidence of the COR® standard's effectiveness.

The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) analyzed its internal capital projects safety data* for the work overseen by its Engineering, Construction, and Expansion (ECE) Group. They show that incident and injury rates have fallen significantly since the agency began requiring that contractors on its projects be COR® certified.

For example, the TTC found that its:

- **Contractor incident rate decreased by 26 per cent (2019–2023).**
- **Contractor injury rate decreased by 54 per cent (2015–2023), including a drop of 73 per cent between 2019 and 2023.**
- **Number of serious incidents requiring investigations—versus notifications alone for minor incidents—declined by 49 per cent (2015–2023).**

"When we talk about construction safety, it all comes down to going home in the same condition that you came into work," says Vlado Dimovski, the TTC's Manager of Construction Management Services. "Our contractors are exposed to construction dangers every day, so it's very gratifying to see that their injury rate has decreased so significantly."

The TTC began requiring COR® certification in 2014—for all firms bidding on contracts worth more than $25 million. The prerequisite was then phased in for smaller contracts over several years. Since 2022, all companies bidding on TTC construction projects, regardless of dollar value, have had to be COR® certified.

Also in 2022, the TTC's own Engineering, Construction, and Expansion Group earned COR® certification, ensuring that the agency, as the first buyer of construction in Ontario to require COR®, "talks the talk" and "walks the walk" when it comes to workplace health and safety. The initiative was sponsored by Gary Downie, the ECE Group's Chief Capital Officer, while Michael Nieznalski, the group's Director, Capital Projects Safety and Security, led the development and implementation of its health and safety program. The journey toward COR® certification was supported by TTC senior management, a dedicated team of safety professionals, and the entire staff of ECE Group.

*Data prepared by Meson Shen, H&S Analyst, TTC ECE Group - Safety and Security

What is COR®?

Administered by the Infrastructure Health and Safety Association (IHSA) and recognized by Ontario's Chief Prevention Officer, COR® is an accreditation standard that verifies full implementation of a company's OHSMS—and its success at managing risks, establishing controls, and minimizing injuries and illnesses to workers—through comprehensive internal and external auditing.

Currently, more than 700 companies in Ontario (and 10,000 companies across Canada) are COR® certified. That group includes some of the province's largest firms as well as many that are considered small businesses. Another 1,500-plus organizations in Ontario are working toward certification.

Even for companies that already have appropriate policies and procedures in place, COR® is a vital tool to help reinforce, improve, and consistently apply best practices. COR®'s emphasis on the plan-do-check-act cycle of continuous improvement helps companies make their health and safety processes as robust as possible while also being adaptable to changes in workplace conditions.

The TTC and COR®

Buyers of construction in Ontario have important responsibilities under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) for ensuring the safety of their contractors' employees. The TTC is just one of a number of major buyers that now require COR® certification to confirm that businesses they work with have functioning occupational health and safety management systems that have been verified by an independent third party.

That growing list of buyers now includes the cities of Toronto, Ottawa, Mississauga, Brampton, Vaughan, and Richmond Hill, as well as York Region, the Town of Milton, Infrastructure Ontario, Metrolinx, the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario.

These buyers are not only acting to fulfill their obligations under the OHSA; they're also ensuring that their contractors are equally committed to maintaining high standards on the job.

Among other things, being COR® certified indicates that a contractor has properly trained site supervisors, site- and activity-specific work plans, and workers who understand those plans and are empowered to make health and safety a top priority every day.

Beyond its evidence-backed health and safety benefits, the TTC's COR® requirement has led to a variety of improvements at the administrative level.

Dimovski recalls that prior to requiring COR®, TTC construction projects would often face start-up delays. Bidding firms' assorted health and safety programs would have to be reviewed—and if they were found lacking, would have to be revised and resubmitted until they were deemed acceptable. Having certainty that all bidders meet or exceed a nationally recognized standard has streamlined the TTC's tendering process and helped get construction started faster.

"And the COR® requirement gives us more confidence in the overall competency of the contractors we work with," he adds. "If they've put together a health and safety program that stands up to scrutiny by a COR® auditor, that means they're capable of putting together a proper construction schedule and then doing high-quality work."

TTC staff have also seen benefits during construction. Fewer contractor health and safety incidents means fewer investigations by the transit agency's in-field construction safety officers. "That means they can devote more time to prevention," Nieznalski says.

Michael Nieznalski at the TTC's Leslie Barns streetcar maintenance facility

Extending TTC subway service into York Region

Excavation work at Greenwood subway station

Vaughan Metropolitan Centre station during construction

Complex, high-risk work

In a typical year, the TTC has about $350 million committed to dozens of projects, from simple state-of-good-repair jobs to larger undertakings such as the expansion of vehicle storage facilities.

Improving subway accessibility is currently a top priority; elevator shafts are being dug at multiple stations across Toronto. The work is large scale and highly complex—and it's being carried out in close proximity to the public. Any incident could endanger not only workers on the site, but also TTC users and anyone who may be nearby or in adjacent buildings.

"From our perspective, the kind of work that we're engaged in requires multiple layers of protection, which need to be embedded in the overall health and safety program," Nieznalski says.

Those "layers" include protection not only for workers employed by contractors and subcontractors, but also the TTC's own staff who may be present on construction sites to help facilitate any work being done. TTC passengers who could be in the vicinity of construction work must also be considered, as well as members of the public who may happen to be walking next to a construction site.

Given the volume of complex, high-risk work being done and the number of people who could be impacted by it at any time, the TTC's recorded 26 per cent decline in incident rate and 73 per cent drop in injury rate are substantial.

"Seeing those indicators improving is very satisfying," Dimovski says. "It validates all the hard work that we've asked our contractors to go through in order to get COR® certified."

Worth the effort

Depending on the state of a company's occupational health and safety management system, it takes an average of two years to earn COR® certification. (This is why the TTC gradually introduced its COR® requirement over multiple years. Other buyers of construction have taken a similar phased-in approach.) The process requires the development and implementation of a number of policies, procedures, and safe-work practices, management and worker training, and then the successful completion of internal and external audits. Hundreds of Ontario businesses—including many companies with fewer than 50 full-time equivalent employees—have already put in the work to achieve COR® and ensure their OHSMS meets a national standard.

To ease the certification process, IHSA is there for COR®-aspiring firms at every step of their journey. Many resources can be found online at **ihsa.ca/cor**, the *IHSA COR® Podcast* walks through each element of the COR® standard in detail, and IHSA consultants are available to answer questions about everything from training requirements to audit preparation to filling in gaps identified by an audit.

And ultimately, the effort is worth it. The injury rate improvements recorded by the TTC—as well as the University of British Columbia's broader COR® study—prove that having a functional, fully verified occupational health and safety management system is the best way for any company to keep its workers healthy and safe.

It can help a company's bottom line, too. "Of course, there are some initial costs to become COR® certified," Dimovski says. "But over time our contractors have realized that being safer translates into more money"—through things like lower WSIB rates and greater efficiency on the job.

"We see COR® certification as a currency, and the stats show that it has value," he adds. "With all our contractors, we want protecting the health and safety of workers to be an everyday occurrence."