

# OH&S COMMITTEE ROLE DURING COVID-19

MAY 28 - BCFED HEALTH & SAFETY CENTRE

Thank you for joining us on the webinar: OH&S Committee Role During COVID-19 hosted by the BCFED HEALTH & SAFETY CENTRE

This outline is being provided to give participants an overview of the presentation and a resource to share with others. The content covers the roles and responsibilities of the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHS), how to identify potential COVID-19 hazards through inspections and performing risk assessments and how to perform an investigation of incidents of exposure and potential exposure to COVID-19.

## A REVIEW OF THE DUTIES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE JOINT OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

The joint committee plays an important role in your occupational health and safety program, giving workers and employers a way to work together to identify and find solutions to workplace health and safety issues. The joint committee has the following specific duties and functions: [Click here to go to the Worker's Compensation Act: Part 2-Div. 5](#)

- Identify situations that may be unhealthy or unsafe for workers, and advise on effective systems for responding to those situations
- Consider, and promptly deal with complaints relating to the health and safety of workers
- Consult with workers and the employer on issues related to occupational health and safety, and the occupational environment
- Make recommendations to the employer and the workers for the improvement of the occupational health and safety, and the occupational environment of workers
- Make recommendations to the employer on educational programs promoting the health and safety of workers and compliance with Part 3 of the *Workers Compensation Act* and the regulations, and to monitor their effectiveness
- Advise the employer on programs and policies required under the regulations for the workplace, and to monitor their effectiveness
- Advise the employer on proposed changes to the workplace, including significant proposed changes to equipment and machinery, or the work processes that may affect the health or safety of workers
- Ensure that accident investigations and regular inspections are carried out as required
- Participate in inspections, investigations and inquiries as provided in Part 3 of the *Workers Compensation Act* and Section 3 of the Regulation

Now more than ever joint occupational health and safety committees need to play a critical role in our workplaces in dealing with this unprecedented pandemic.

The committee is a foundational component of workplace health and safety programs and its roles and responsibilities have never been more vital

## ROLE OF COMMITTEE IN RESPONDING TO COVID-19

It is important to understand as much as is possible, how the virus can be transmitted. This helps to identify where the hazards are in the workplace.

### We do know that the modes of transmission include:

- The virus is spread through human to human interaction
- In workplaces where there may be aerosolized procedures there is potential for exposure from minute airborne particles generated by the procedure (this is generally in a medical environment)
- When a person sneezes, droplets may spread the virus to another person
- The large droplets generated by sneezing, generally fall to a surface within minutes
- The virus can then live on surfaces from several hours to several days
- Surfaces may also be contaminated by the virus if somebody sneezed into their hands, wipes their nose, or touches other contaminated surfaces and then touches other surfaces

### Possible Modes of Transmission:

- This is a new virus and other potential modes of are being studied. Considering that all modes of transmission may not have been identified, one must follow the Precautionary Principle.
- Although not currently confirmed, research is ongoing to consider transmission through contact with:
  - Feces
  - Blood
  - Minute particles from breathing, speaking, exhaling

## INSPECTIONS

Workplace inspections play a critical role in ensuring workplaces are healthy and safe. During this situation, taking the necessary steps to protect those who remain at work, including preventative measures to slow the progression of COVID-19 and mitigate exposures are critical in protecting

workers. Committees need to explore alternative approaches when connecting with workplaces, including remote inspections.

[Click here to find more information on preventing exposure in the workplace.](#)

- The employer must conduct inspections of the workplace at intervals that will prevent the development of unsafe working conditions, including potential exposure to COVID-19.
- Inspections must be done collaboratively with a worker representative and an employer representative.
- Effort is to consider potential means of exposure to the workforce.
- An inspection report should document the areas inspected and hazards identified.

Your inspection report should clearly document the risks and safety concerns identified and you should be prepared to discuss possible measures to minimize the risk of exposure based on observations of the work environment and your communication with workers.

- **Identify** where transmission may take place
- **Determine** if workers and supervisors understand the modes of transmission and the need for effective control measures
- **Determine** if workers and supervisors are following safe work procedures and are compliant with any control measures documented in the ECP
- **Identify** any psycho-social or chemical considerations related to working during the pandemic
- **Give** consideration as to how risk factors may change when more workers return to work (potential risk factors)

*\*Please refer to the COVID-19 Inspection Checklist <https://www.healthandsafetybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Inspection-Checklist.pdf>*

## RISK ASSESSMENTS, CONTROL MEASURES AND FOLLOW-UP

Employers must assess their workplaces in order to identify places where the risk of transmission is introduced. This process must involve frontline workers, supervisors, and joint health and safety committees and/or worker representatives. Assessments of the workplace should continue after operations resume to ensure risks are identified and managed. COVID-19 is a new virus, research including modes of transmission and control measures to prevent transmission is ongoing provincially, nationally, and internationally. Employers must ensure that the risk assessment and the exposure control plan (CEP) developed in response to the risk assessment remains current and aligns with any new information provided through the BCCDC or the Provincial Health Officer.

## Risk is the likelihood that the hazard could cause injury, illness/disease, or death:

- Risk= Consequence x Exposure x Probability
- The joint occupational health and safety committee must participate in conducting a risk assessment.
- Consideration of exposure and probability must be given to identified hazards
- An ECP is a document that explains how workers will be protected hazardous exposures
- COVID-19 is a new virus requiring an ECP.
- In developing the ECP, consideration will be given to potential exposure to COVID-19 in work areas, job functions and job tasks as applicable.
- All workers and the supervisors must be trained in the modes of transmission for the virus and the control measures implemented, as documented in the ECP.
- After implementing control measures it is necessary to reevaluate that the risk has been eliminated or minimized.
- Sometimes, the introduction of control measures can bring forth new, unexpected hazards.

## INVESTIGATIONS

Incident investigations help identify the cause and hazards, while finding ways to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

- Like any other workplace incident, an incident investigation must be conducted when a worker seeks medical aid or if there is a potential for serious injury.
- 48 hours to conduct preliminary investigation
- 30 days to complete full investigation
- Timetable for recommendations
- Conducted jointly with employer and worker representatives

*\*Please refer to the COVID-19 Inspection Checklist <https://www.healthandsafetybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Inspection-Checklist.pdf>*

## CONTROL MEASURES

Once an inspection or risk assessment has identified hazards associated with COVID-19, control measures must be implemented in the workplace to prevent exposure. When selecting a safeguard or a combination of safeguards, always start at the top of the hierarchy shown below to control the hazards. Choose a less effective safeguard only when more effective solutions are impracticable. Controls should be developed in consultation with your joint health and safety committee or worker representative and continuously monitored to ensure they are providing the best level of protection to workers.

## Hierarchy of controls:

- **Elimination or Substitution:** This involves removing the risk of exposure entirely from the workplace. This could involve postponing, re-organizing, or planning work in such a way that workers are not exposed to any risk. Having workers work remotely would be an example or eliminating the risk from the workplace.
- **Engineering controls:** These are physical changes in the workplace, such as installing plexiglass barriers in a grocery store.
- **Administrative controls:** This involves altering work practices to minimize exposure, such as minimizing the numbers of customers inside grocery stores, staggering work shifts, making virtual appointments, working from home etc.
- **Personal protective equipment (PPE):** This last form of protection should only be considered after careful consideration of the previous control measures. Some workplaces have specific requirements for PPE, such as in health care settings.
  - Very important step in an investigation
  - Needs to prevent recurrence
  - Not about fault or blame
  - Follow-up to ensure effectiveness and be sure that the control did not introduce a new risk factor.

## REFERENCES

- [http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID19\\_Poster\\_002\\_English.pdf](http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID19_Poster_002_English.pdf)
- <http://covid-19.bccdc.ca/>
- [https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701\(15\)00367-9/fulltext](https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701(15)00367-9/fulltext)

## CONTACT THE BCFED HEALTH & SAFETY CENTRE:

**Email:**  
[ohsadmin@bcfed.ca](mailto:ohsadmin@bcfed.ca)

**Website:**  
<https://www.healthandsafetybc.ca/about/contact/>

We hope that you stay healthy and safe during this crisis and we look forward to staying connected with you.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**BCFED Health & Safety Centre: 1-888-223-5669**

**WorkSafeBC: 1-888-621-SAFE**

**ESDC Labour Program: 1-800-641-4049**

If you are a member of a union in BC, contact your union local.