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Expert partnerships in the HVAC industry working to minimize COVID-19 transmission in hospitals

There are still so many questions when it comes to COVID-19 with regards to its transmission and the best way to mitigate its spread. However, one certainty is that taking measures to keep hospitals, healthcare workers and patients safe is key to fighting this pandemic.

Since the first case of 2019-nCoV infection was reported in the United States on January 20, 2020, the Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA) have been working tirelessly together to flip hospitals to purify the air, improve ventilation, manage airflows, provide testing and data analysis, and keep healthcare clients updated as new information comes to light.

This once somewhat silent industry, which previously held a behind-the-scenes role in cleaning up the air and ensuring the lungs of the building stay clean, has been called upon to sit at the table on advisory boards to help provide solutions in controlling the pandemic in hospitals and beyond.

Dave Roche, business manager at SMART Local 40 in Connecticut, has been part of the State Governor's task force to reopen Connecticut. He is the only labor person from any industry on this advisory council. "Being on the task force has allowed me to get the information straight and prevent misinformation" Roche says. "All the updates from the healthcare sector are shared immediately with not just our 1,000-plus members, but SMART Locals across the country, keeping us abreast of the situation as it unfolds.

"This has been essential to our SMART and SMACNA partners. Our members were already unknowingly prepared before the pandemic hit, having already done the training and working with many of these hospitals' HVAC systems, but being at the table allowed us to keep updated on changes and be part of knowledge sharing."

HVAC data and testing have been an essential component to better understanding how the virus spreads and SMACNA contractors have been in the thick of it to ensure they give hospital clients information from which they can make informed decisions.

SMACNA-New Mexico member Energy Balance & Integration LLC (EB&I) and their Local 49 craftsmen and women have been working with five major hospitals in the state of New Mexico on testing and balancing to provide them with audit reports and pressure gradient setting, room tightness testing, duct leakage testing, and troubleshooting of systems.

"We had already set ourselves up in niche hospital work, so when the pandemic hit we were fully prepared to step up," Tony Kocurek, EB&I owner explains. "It wasn't that much of a shift."

Ron Landberg, owner of MacDonald-Miller, works with several hospitals in the Pacific Northwest and has a dedicated HVAC data and testing healthcare team. He has been sharing information with his partners at SMART Local 16 in Oregon and SMART Local 66 in Western Washington.

“I heard the other day that turning a floor too negative may not be the best solution to containing the virus and that lower differential pressure is better, so for the last couple of days I have been in seminars with healthcare engineers discussing how best to move forward as more information comes to light,” explains Landberg.

With this data, the industry is able to adjust accordingly, and in many cases provide new solutions. Montana SMACNA member Chris Schaff, owner of Air Controls in Billings in Montana, came up with a new purification system very early on in the pandemic. “The more we learned about how this virus spreads, the more we knew air quality was a necessity and we began the initial examination with ways to implement improvement,” Schaff says.

This resulted in the creation of four new TG-Series Air Purifiers that went into production in mid-April. These are now being used in hospitals across the state. Schaff credits Local 103 Business Manager John Carter for helping spread the word about the benefits of these portable and quiet systems.

While we have a long way to go in our understanding of how to best contain the virus, you can rest assured that the experts at SMART and SMACNA, those who have the boots on the ground, are utilizing this historic partnership for the safety and wellbeing of our country: whether it’s providing data for science-based research and to assist with the ASHRAE epidemic task force’s guidelines on HVAC, or stepping in to retrofit systems in hospitals or provide solutions.

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The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor-management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org.