

MANAGING JOBS



Working Efficiently in the Time of COVID A remodeler looks back on a year working around housebound clients

BY MIKE WHALEN

I'm a project manager and lead carpenter for DBS Remodel, a residential remodeling company based in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. We're a mid-sized design-build firm with 17 full-time employees, most of whom have been with the company for 10 to 25 years (I have been with DBS for 18 years). We're a close-knit group with a reputation in our community as quality remodelers who meet challenges head on. But nothing in our past work experience could have helped us prepare for the nerve-wracking events of last March when the state of New York shut down all "non-essential" construction due to the coronavirus.

Like many in our profession, our company had to furlough all its employees at the beginning of the pandemic. Undaunted, we stayed connected via group chats and Zoom while under stay-at-home

orders and began to plan how to weather the crisis. Our company president assembled a "COVID Care Team" tasked with researching and developing COVID safety protocols in preparation for re-opening (see "Developing COVID-19 Safety Protocols," pages 44 and 45).

By mid-May 2020, the state of New York reclassified residential remodelers as "essential" workers, albeit allowing only one worker per jobsite, and we began to make our way back to our jobsites. Crew size without limitations was soon allowed, provided we follow on-site COVID safety protocols. Our office managed to incrementally attain half-staff levels by following its own set of COVID rules, while office personnel who can work from home still do so.

Managing projects during a pandemic. We've been fortunate to maintain a consistent volume of kitchen and bath remodels over

Photos by Mike Whalen, graphics by DBS Remodel



The house before a pop-up addition was built **(1)**. Working outside over existing living space in winter and maintaining 6-foot social distancing, carpenters removed existing roof framing **(2)**, while electrical subs working closer together wore masks rewiring ceiling lights **(3)**. The home was tented off as necessary **(4)**. Demo began on a Monday and the new pop-up addition **(5)** was shingled by Saturday afternoon. Access to the second-level work area was by ladder only at this stage.

the years, along with a few basement conversion projects and home additions. When “non-essential” construction initially shut down due to the virus, we worried about the possibility that clients may not want us back in their homes for weeks, months, or even years.

Quite the opposite occurred, and the pandemic ended up creating a residential building and real estate boom in our area; we’ve had a higher volume of work than in previous years, with sales remaining strong. But, along with the record-breaking demand, some scheduling “head winds” unique to the pandemic and our remodeling niche have occurred.

Early into the pandemic, a new duty for our project managers was to explain to our trade partners and visitors the company’s COVID safety protocols and enforce them (which included taking temperatures and making sure everyone was wearing masks and washing their hands regularly). We also had to be diligent about separating our work areas from the clients who were isolating in place, using plastic, ZipWall poles, and tape. Access to work areas was kept to a minimum with signage noting that they were “COVID Clean Zones.”

This additional COVID gatekeeping added time to our schedules, but more impactful was having to plan around trade partners who had to self-quarantine (typically for 10 days) either because they came in contact with people with the virus or they had traveled.

Also, in an effort to anticipate possible scheduling backups, we scheduled our project preconstruction meetings at least a month ahead of mobilizing on site (pre-pandemic, we typically scheduled them two weeks in advance). Lead times on materials such as windows, doors, and cabinets were long as well as replacement times for any damaged or mis-shipped items (though lead times are starting to show signs of getting better). Material shortages driven by demand and supply-chain issues became enough of a problem that we had to improvise our material selection to meet schedules. On more than one occasion, we had to purchase longer 2-by stock and cut it down to length because shorter length material wasn’t available, and we had to run to Home Depot to pick up slightly lesser-grade interior doors—with client approval—because of delays from our usual vendors. We did not like the inefficiency and the potential waste this presented,

Developing COVID-19 Safety Protocols

At the end of March 2020, our company president called a team meeting via Zoom to begin to researching and developing COVID safety protocols. We formed a “COVID Care Team” with a goal of becoming “COVID Clean” on site and in the office. Each member of the team was assigned different research areas, such as tracking quickly changing state requirements, developing lists of safety precautions we would need to take to resume working in clients’ homes again, and brainstorming ideas on where to allocate cleaning and isolating-barrier supplies needed to re-open.

A human resources firm we had fortuitously hired a couple of months before the pandemic provided us a wealth of literature on COVID-19 regarding prevention, safety, and legal aspects of opening up our business (a serious concern at the time was that businesses could be fined up to

\$10,000 per safety protocol violation).

Within weeks, we had assembled our “DBS COVID Care Manual,” a 42-page document comprising New York State health and safety guidelines and office and field procedures, which we fine-tuned to our remodeling business (see “Field Procedures for Interior Renovating” excerpt on facing page). The manual served as a training resource for our workers and trade partners, and though it wasn’t required in the field by law, we could easily access the document on our phones via our Buildertrend app if we needed to refer to it.

Looking to the future, jobsite procedures learned from this crisis, such as hand-washing stations and portable toilets, both with hand sanitizer, will be adopted post-pandemic. Using the homeowner’s facilities will no longer be an option—*M.W.*



DBS COVID Care Program

JOBSITE & OFFICE

When we’re a guest in your home, your safety and the safety of others is our top priority. That’s why we’ve developed a COVID Care Program to put protocols and mandatory procedures in place that will help keep everyone healthy & safe!

JOBSITE PROTOCOL

Our onsite protocol is extensive and includes precautions such as:

- Mandatory face masks & proper PPE to be worn throughout the duration of your project
- Creating a barrier zone with ZipWalls & plastic to keep potential contaminations at bay
- Twice daily “scrub downs” of doorknobs, railings, and surfaces used for entry/exiting
- Daily job site disinfecting of tools, work zones, and surfaces
- Rinse stations for hands, tools, and equipment

OFFICE PROTOCOL

If you have to visit our office for any reason, please find comfort in knowing our office has put in place a comprehensive protocol that includes:

- Wearing face masks & proper PPE
- Disinfecting work areas daily
- Maintaining proper social distancing from one another
- Minimizing inter office exposure
- Usage of digital forms and documents

JOBSITE PROTOCOL: TRADE PARTNERS & VISITORS

Any trade affiliates and/or visitors will be notified and expected to follow the same sanitary guidelines that we’ve put in place. We will also abide by any additional requests and procedures that they’ve implemented as well.



“
Together, we can help
stop the contamination
& spread of COVID-19
”

Wearing masks emblazoned with the company logo, members of the COVID Care Team (top left) helped develop the “DBS COVID Care Manual” (partial cover, bottom left). The manual served as a training resource for DBS workers and trade partners. Flyers with condensed information from the manual (above right) were handed out to the homeowners.

Developing COVID-19 Safety Protocols

The following is an excerpt of the author's company "DBS COVID Care Manual."

Field Procedures for Interior Renovating:

1. Create a barrier of the immediate work area using plastic, Zip poles, tape, etc. It will be the judgment of the individual working in this area to determine whether the use of an air scrubber will be safe and efficient.
2. No one will enter this barriered area without a face covering. If more than one person is in this area, it will be the responsibility of the individuals working to wear face coverings. Additionally, communicate with the homeowner whether a face covering is necessary when in the barriered workspace.
3. It will be the responsibility of that individual in that work area to determine if the use of gloves is necessary based on safety issues.
4. When exiting the work area, either to gather materials or tools, or for bathroom use, a face covering shall be worn until the individual has safely exited the home. The same applies for entry or re-entry to the work zone.
5. At the beginning and end of each day, any doorknobs, railings, hard surfaces, etc. that are touched to gain entry to the work area will be disinfected by the individual working in that space.
6. At the end of each day, the immediate work area shall be disinfected including hard surfaces, tools/equipment left in the area, and the air within the workspace.
7. Once this area is disinfected, a "No entry COVID Clean Zone" sign will be posted outside the space. If a homeowner is allowed to enter this area (after work hours), it will be the responsibility of the homeowner to follow the same protocol that has been put in place by DBS Remodel. The sign can be posted during the course of the workday to remind the homeowner of the DBS protocol listed above.

All trade affiliates will have the responsibility to:

1. Come to DBS jobsites in good health and deem themselves safe to work.
2. Abide by the DBS protocol on the jobsite for any interior/exterior operations, and for the privilege to use and clean the DBS supplied portable toilet.
3. Respect any DBS employee as we would respect you. If you are asked to leave a jobsite due to suspicion of your current health condition, you do so in a respectful, businesslike manner.
4. Respectfully abide by a heeded warning if it is deemed that you have violated the DBS protocol. If any violation were to continue, you may be asked to leave the jobsite.
5. Wear a face covering for any interior meetings that take place between yourself and the homeowner or any DBS employee. It will be your responsibility to provide your own face covering.



A hand-washing station complete with hand soap, rinse water in a sprayer, paper towels, and hand sanitizer is currently mandatory on all jobsites (and will be after the pandemic, per company policy).



An example of the laminated COVID safety signage prominently placed around the jobsite.



An air scrubber helped keep workspace air separate from a client's living area (6). Inside, electrical subs working in close proximity wore masks (7), while a plumbing sub working alone wore a mask though it wasn't required (8). A "COVID Clean Zone" sign (9) was placed at the only interior access (10) to a new-master-suite work area. The completed pop-up addition (11).

but competition with larger builders for materials at the time left us with little choice.

Housebound clients. Since returning to work last May, I've run seven remodeling projects: a few bathrooms, a kitchen, a basement conversion project, and a pop-up addition. Our crew and trade partners were easily able to isolate from the homeowners on the basement and addition projects, but the interior kitchen and bath remodels were a little more intimate. On the kitchen project, the homeowners were an older couple, so we were careful to follow our COVID-19 safety protocols to a T. We were diligent about wearing masks all the time, maintaining the ZipWall barrier, keeping the number of workers and visits to a minimum, and using an air scrubber for both dust control and to create negative pressure in an effort to keep air in the workspace separate from the clients' living area.

With the pop-up addition (shown in the photos on page 43 and above), we were able to slightly ease up on the safety protocols because the work area was separated from where the homeowners were. We had to build over existing living space, taking the roof off the low-

er single-story part of the house and adding a new second floor for a master bedroom suite. The job scope also included upgrading the existing electrical service, so we needed to schedule disconnecting power with the homeowners, who, along with their school-age children, were working remotely online.

Learning from the crisis. With vaccinations rolling out, the pandemic appears to be showing signs of waning. In our region, there has been a huge cultural shift with regard to people working from home and moving out of the New York City metropolitan area. This hit home for me when a client we just completed a remodeling project for was told that their offices would be permanently closing and that "this is your life, you're working remotely from home from now on." This may be the new normal—or a hybrid of this and the pre-pandemic "normal." Regardless, we intend to adopt new procedures learned from this crisis to keep our company vital and thriving.

Mike Whalen is a project manager at DBS Remodel, a design-build residential remodeling company based in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.