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Reopening Hollywood: COVID-19 Safety Coordinators Should Be New Reality, Proposed Guidelines Say

By Dominic Patten
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***Editors' Note:** Deadline's latest series, Reopening Hollywood, focuses on the incredibly complicated effort to get the industry back on its feet while ensuring the safety of everyone involved. Our goal is to examine numerous sides of the business and provide forum for leaders in Hollywood who have a vision for how production could safely restart in the era of coronavirus.*

EXCLUSIVE: As numerous Hollywood studios, guilds, lobby groups, streamers and local politicians form task forces to blueprint how the industry can safely get back to work amid the coronavirus pandemic, a group of below-the-line workers are taking matters and recommendations into their own experienced hands.

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With a plan that could easily be scaled for TV series and feature films, about 100 commercial production designers and art directors are circulating a dense but succinct six-point COVID-19 workflow considerations document, a copy of which Deadline has obtained (read it here). Among the recommendations contained in the self-described "open-ended" document, which was just posted online here, is the creation of a new position on all production sets to address the realities and lingering concerns of the potentially fatal coronavirus.

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"A safety coordinator position should be developed, to oversee the implementation of and adherence to safety practices, as developed by state and local public health officials," says the five-page, bullet-point-heavy offering, which has been signed by pros who have worked on big shows and movies as well as in the ad world. It adds that "return to work will be "accompanied by a stated set of practices and protocols developed" by IATSE and the Association of Independent Commercial Producers. "Establishing a safety coordinator and point of contact will allow ongoing concerns to be addressed promptly, while minimizing the interruption to the workflow and the achievement of objectives."

Much along the lines of how an American Humane representative is on a set when animals are being filmed, the new coordinator is envisioned as serving as a third-party arbitrator to buffer concerns and possible friction on productions, we hear.

The document "represents the input of a large and informal group of commercial production designers and art directors whose wish is to work with producers and production companies to understand and implement emerging COVID-19 protocols," it reads. "We all want to get back to work safely, and to find creative expression and collaboration in this new landscape."

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Along with Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti's film and TV working group announced last week, the previously established self-titled Industry-Wide Labor-Management Joint Safety is also in the process of putting together new rules to reopen a Tinseltown that closed down near the end of March amid the pandemic. At the same time, as IATSE plus the likes of SAG-AFTRA, the AMPTP, WGA, DGA and PGA as well as the studios, networks and streamers consult with medical experts and civic officials in L.A., New York City and elsewhere, a number of below-the-line workers that Deadline has spoken with express serious reservations about what those results may look like.

"Of course, liability is going to be a major sticking point, but even if that is dealt with, I know that you'll start seeing corners cut within a few weeks once everyone is back on set," an established camera department member said. "It's how it always is, not enough time, changes in the script or something like that and under pressure stuff will start to slide, no matter how scared or careful people say they want to be."

"All the guidelines and all the new protocols are going to eat up a lot of time, and time is money in this business," another below-the-line worker said of the current consultations. "Everybody needs the work, everybody needs content, and safety is almost always the first to suffer."

In that vein, considerations posted today proclaim that "all work during prep should be performed in consultation with a safety officer, regulating the maximum concentration of people in any given area is adhered to at all times."

With itemized categories including General Safety, Pre-Production & Budgeting, Pre-Production: Design & Prep, Stage or Location Build & Dress, Shoot, and Wrap, the document concludes on the point that "any environmental cleaning of a location or studio (if deemed necessary) would be coordinated by a safety advisor and/or location manager, and performed after the art department has concluded their work."

Emphasizing social-distancing needs and PPE procurement as a baseline for any resumption of production, the considerations do not outline where said safety coordinators or safety advisors would come from. Nor does it detail precise qualifications that individual or individuals would require and who would pay them – though it is presumed the cost would come from the production company of each project.

"We all know that there will be additional health and safety measures necessary to resume work," a production executive who saw the document, officially titled COVID-19: Commercial Art Department Workflow Consideration, told Deadline. "No one is going to scrimp on that, it is time that will be the real determining factor. Meaning how long will it take to make a show or a movie and how can you make that really work with schedules and budgets?"

With production resuming now in Australia, Sweden/Denmark, Poland as well as in July at Tyler Perry's sprawling Atlanta facilities, time will ultimately tell.

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