

SNIPS

COVID-19

As coronavirus closes the Bay Area, Western Allied Mechanical presses on

CEO Angie Simon, president of SMACNA, on how the company is reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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SNIPS Editorial Staff

It certainly wasn't a normal Monday to begin with at Western Allied Mechanical (WAM) in the San Francisco Bay Area, but CEO Angie Simon knew something big was going to happen at a 1 p.m. press conference with San Francisco Mayor London Breed.

It was during that press conference that six counties in the SF Bay Area directed residents to shelter-in-place, and only leave the house for "essential services" for the next three weeks.



Western Allied Mechanical CEO and SMACNA president Angie Simon. Photo courtesy of SMACNA.

“We basically realized that we were going to need to shut all of our job sites down and send all of our folks home,” says Simon, who is also president of the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association.

Western Allied — a mid-sized design-build HVAC construction company located in Menlo Park, California — immediately held an upper management meeting in their rear parking lot, forming what Simon described as a “big but spread out” circle. The game plan at the time was for the company to completely shut down, which they did starting Tuesday.

But when the official government order was released later Monday night, Simon was encouraged to see some exceptions for “essential infrastructure” construction work.

“We have a project for Kaiser [Permanente] that was going to be an IVF (in Vitro Fertilization) facility, but now they want to make it a temporary testing lab,” Simon says. “So, they’ve asked us to remobilize and proceed with that project.”

The rest of the week for Western Allied was a balancing act of weaving through the government orders to determine what is and isn’t considered essential, discussing public safety concerns with general contractors, project owners and the union, and keeping up with the latest news from all levels of government, with updates coming in rapid succession.

For WAM employees, all of these are happening from their homes for the time being, leading Simon to joke that it would be a “bad time to have a minutes limit for my phone bill.”

According to Simon, Western Allied is encouraging its employees that are working from home to complete certification and software trainings that they haven’t done yet, such as OSHA-30 and Procore. But after a few days of logistics, Simon says that Western Allied is going to start a few job sites again.

“We’ll have health testing every morning — temperature checks, questionnaires, multiple hand washing stations,” Simon says. “The challenge we have right now though, is that there’s a massive shortage of personal protection equipment, like masks and gloves. We’re being asked to donate those to the healthcare workers, but if we’re going to be doing maintenance and working in facilities like this, we need to keep some for ourselves. We’ll help them as much as we can, but we need to make sure our employees are safe, too.”

But one thing Simon’s happy for is that [California has set up a furlough program for their union workers](#), expediting the unemployment process and allowing them to collect checks even if they work partial weeks.

Overall, Simon says she has been appreciative of the ways that the Bay Area sheet metal industry has been proactive in taking precautions for the entire community’s sake, even if they — and so many other businesses — will undoubtedly suffer for it.

“It’s the right thing to do to try and flatten the curve of this virus,” she says. “If everyone follows this, we’ll get less people contaminated and the virus will hopefully go away in the three weeks. It’s tough, but it’s the right thing to do.”

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