

COVID-19 Impact on Massage Workers

Flushing-based migrant massage workers first experienced the impacts of COVID-19 in the last weeks of January, when business dropped drastically due to widespread xenophobic fears that the Coronavirus was concentrated in Chinese diasporic communities. In these early weeks, massage workers reported seeing about one client a day on a good day, and were struggling to live off earnings of \$20-30 a day.

By March 20th, when all non-essential businesses were mandated to close, many massage workers had already stopped working due to growing fears of personal safety as they lack access to primary care physicians, cleaning supplies, medicine, and personal protective gear. Because their personal resource networks are primarily contained to Flushing, they are limited to grocery stores and pharmacies in the area. After several of these large grocery stores closed on April 1st, most low wage workers in Flushing have been left with limited options to buy fresh food. Many reported price gouging for essentials, yet, are unable to travel outside of this dense immigrant enclave.

Many migrant workers share bedrooms in apartments that are subleased and divided in order to be affordable. Living in these close living situations, many are unable to follow social distancing protocols when they live with others who are essential workers. The subleasing arrangement means that rent strikes are not a feasible option.

Finally, the challenges presented by COVID-19 conflate existing struggles migrant sex workers have faced as the subjects of state violence and the anti-trafficking movement. In the past several years, the amplification of policing on Flushing's 39th Avenue, pursued by the

Flushing Chamber of Commercial Business Improvement District in collaboration with the NYPD, has already resulted in the mass surveillance and displacement of migrant massage workers. The increased policing of licensure, heightened barriers to obtaining licenses--policies introduced and pursued by national anti-trafficking organizations like the Polaris Project--have caused migrant massage workers to seek work in other cities and other low wage service sector industries.

The ongoing pressures on massage owners and workers alike, has meant that massage owners are less likely to verify employment for workers who are applying for unemployment insurance. Migrant massage workers who are unemployed will receive no government assistance, and those who have filed taxes have no employers willing to verify their employment.

Rather than ensure their safety, each of these measures that have been enacted to "regulate" Asian massage work--alongside the ongoing stigmatization that such work is "illicit" by nature-- exacerbates the challenges massage workers will face during, and as they emerge from this crisis.

During this time of crises, please consider supporting local food pantries and migrant and sex worker relief funds.

Red Canary Song is bringing funds and provisions (food, sanitizing and safety supplies, and funds) directly to workers in Flushing. Please consider donating through their fiscal sponsor.

Paypal Link:

https://www.paypal.com/donate/?cmd=_s-xclick&hosted_button_id=EQ4H2W93PMT8A&source=url

Red Canary Song

Website: <http://redcanarysong.org/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/redcanarysong/>