

Choosing between Work and Health

Waiting at Howard Beach-JFK train station, where there is non stop human traffic, a steady flow of people coming in and out from all walks of life. This being the central hub, a train station teeming with life, never asleep. This is my backyard, my only connection to the outside world. Seeing all the colorful characters coming in and out, not a care in the world, life undisturbed. At this point in time COVID-19 wasn't a harsh reality, only a virus no different then the standard flu. Sure there were headlines in other countries about this virus taking their country by storm, but the threat was yet to touch home. As Americans we have this weird misconception that we are immune to the problems of the world, as seen in our preparation by the time that COVID-19 touched U.S soil.

When it reached the United States not many people were taking COVID-19 seriously, including the government. Some people heeded the warnings, while others called the virus a hoax. The true threat yet to be revealed. As time passed it became clear, this was real, an aggressive virus capable of spreading rapidly with unknown effects and little to no information on how to prevent and treat it. At this point I am a working college student. Aware of the virus's presence but ignorant of its true affects. Day by day more and more I start to hear how COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire. The fear starts to set in, headlines across news stations about a killer virus spreading through the states. Then it happened... March 14, 2020 Governor Cuomo announces New York's first two COVID-19 deaths.

Deaths start to skyrocket. The government, now taking the virus and its danger seriously. Initially addressing the public with mere suggestions of wearing a mask and social distancing turned into a mandated lockdown. Essential workers being the only exception. Essential workers are considered to be those in health care operations, vital infrastructure, manufacturing, retail, financial institutions and services necessary to maintain the safety and operations for New Yorkers. The effects of the lockdown were immediately felt by my family and I. My father is a plumber and the main provider for the family, however, due to his occupation he was not considered an essential employee. This stressed the importance of me continuing to work to help as best I could. My place of work was considered an essential business.

While working I constantly worried about contracting COVID-19 and bringing it home to my family. Even with masks being mandated, customers came into my workplace without them and disregard social distancing rules. Several of my coworkers were already placed on sick leave after contracting COVID-19. I could not stop myself from thinking about whether or not I came into close contact with them and if I would contract it. Nonetheless, I tried to distance myself from coworkers and customers when possible yet I often found myself wondering why I was even working during the pandemic. As an essential worker, I was in constant contact with both

coworkers and customers which made it nearly impossible to maintain social distancing and working from home was not an option.

I considered taking an unpaid leave of absence. Why was I putting my family and myself at risk for a minimum wage job? Was it worth it? ... It would be selfish of me to continue working, especially when it could potentially alter my family's lives. After all, my mother had preexisting health conditions and was in and out of the hospital for the past year, my father was a heavy smoker and prediabetic, and my brother, only twelve relied on our parents to provide. I decided the best thing for my family and I would be to take a leave of absence. My leave of absence lasted three months, which was the most time I could possibly receive without the risk of losing my job. While on my leave of absence, my family and I followed lockdown orders and remained negative for COVID-19.

My first day back there were new protocols taken by my employer to ensure a “safe” working environment which included taking our temperature before clocking in, shield protectors, and cleaning equipment every hour. But still, this was not enough to ensure a “safe” working environment. I was still uneasy about getting back to work as I was in the beginning of the pandemic. It was the same as pre-COVID in the sense that customer service did not change. If anything there were more close encounters with customers due to being a healthcare store.

Within two weeks of being back at work the virus invaded my home. My father, being the first of my family to show symptoms, went to get examined. He waited a grueling 3 hours before being seen and tested. My father came home and delivered the unfortunate news that he tested positive. What was next? The rest of my family, fearing that we all had been infected, sought an available COVID-19 testing center. The process of trying to just receive testing for COVID-19 was another battle in itself. I was under the impression that getting tested wouldn't be as hard given the panic and suggestions of getting tested frequently. Then luck strikes, after 4-5 days of searching, we find a pop up testing center in a local high school. We all get tested and all of us are positive except my mother.

After our terrible experience with trying to get tested we arrive home, that's when the fear and panic sets in, along with all the questions. “Do I really have it?” “Are we going to be okay?” I remember thinking about the possible effects we could experience among the various symptoms reported. Now it was all just a waiting game... a minimum of two weeks in quarantine. Between all my family, the symptoms varied. My father had the worst experience with this virus, shortness of breath, heavy congestion, muscle soreness, fatigue, and all if not most of the reported symptoms. All he could do was sleep all day and night, essentially bed ridden. My brother and I had less serious symptoms such as chills, headaches, and body fatigue, but also losing all sense of taste and smell. My brother and I spent much of our quarantine time together, binge watching shows and eating spicy food on account of not being able to taste it. I spent much

of my time trying to be strong for my family but I feared the loss of taste and smell would be permanent, especially because so little is known about the after effects. The two weeks dragged for what felt like a month and some of the symptoms like loss of taste and smell still persisted even after our two weeks of quarantine and testing negative. Thankfully our symptoms were not fatal as not all people are so fortunate to have had such a simple experience with COVID-19.

For many essential workers the health insecurities they face while working during the pandemic are plentiful. Deep underlying inequalities prior to COVID-19 existed, however, pre-existing inequalities became exacerbated during the pandemic. Many essential workers face either one or more of the following problems: unemployment, health insecurity or inability to work remotely.

In New York City alone essential workers account for more than one million which is 25 percent of the workforce. But who are our essential workers? Well, women alone account for more than 60 percent of all essential workers, more than 50 percent of essential workers are foreign born and non-citizens account for 19 percent of essential workers in New York City. For essential workers of all walks of life there is a story to be told. It is equally as important that there is a voice behind these statistics. [1]

Endnotes

[1]“New YorkCity's Frontline Workers.” *New York City Comptroller*, 26 Mar. 2020, comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-frontline-workers/.