



COMMUNIQUE

#CORONAVIRUS2020

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

As the new year was just settling in to the new decade, life was turned upside down as the coronavirus – COVID-19 – made its way into the busy streets of New York City and forever changed the lives of millions.

By Marci Rosenblum

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What was once just a horrible virus New Yorkers read about that was devastating China and had then spread to Italy, was now working its way through the overcrowded, winding streets of the Big Apple. The outbreak, first recognized in early December 2019 in Wuhan, China, had spread widely throughout the world, but had seemingly spared the United States.

COVID-19 was extensively covered in the media. New Yorkers joined the rest of Americans in thankful, silent prayer that the crippling plague had not made its way to this country. While the number of cases was growing substantially in the rest of the world, incidences in the New York area remained relatively rare. Until they didn't.

"This seemed to hit us out of the blue," said Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton, who like other New York City union presidents, was caught off guard when immediate mandates to shut down nonessential city offices and allow municipal employees to telework were put into place by both the state and city. "Our lives as we knew them were turned upside down overnight. As union leaders, we were working in overdrive to make sure all our members were taken care of and that those who were considered nonessential were able to begin working from home immediately. We had separate concerns for our essential workers, and we still do, to make sure they had protections on the job in the form of gloves and masks, and were kept as far away from others as possible."

While New Yorkers are no less susceptible to the virus than anyone else in America, New York City quickly became the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic for myriad reasons, including the fact that the rate of global travelers visiting or traveling through the city is significantly higher than in the rest of the country. Of course, the population density also made the city extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. With roughly 8.6 million residents, making it the most populous city in the U.S., the only way to even begin to contain the virus was to get the vast majority of residents off the streets.

"The numbers speak for themselves," Middleton said. "Overcrowded streets, overcrowded subways and buses, people sneezing and coughing on each other, we are a breeding ground for germs. With something like 27,000 people per square mile in New York City, the only thing officials could do was to shut down if there was even a small hope

of getting the coronavirus under control."

On March 22 at 8 p.m., Governor Cuomo put New York on PAUSE, a 10-point, stay-at-home executive order to assure uniform safety that shuttered all nonessential businesses statewide and canceled or postponed all nonessential gatherings of any size for any reason. PAUSE means any concentration of individuals outside their homes must be limited to workers providing essential services and social distancing of at least six feet should be practiced; individuals should limit outdoor recreational activities to non-contact, avoid activities where they come in close contact with other people, and limit their use of public transportation to only times deemed necessary. Those who are sick should not leave their homes unless they need medical care and only after a telehealth visit has determined leaving their home is in the best interest of their health.

Local 1180 Secretary-Treasurer Robin Blair-Batte said the union initially was ready to go into the field to give more support to members, but things quickly changed.

"We realized our place was not to be in the field, but to be on the phones as much as possible to deal with the crisis. In order to comply with the 'Stay-at-Home' order for nonessentials, we had to shut down the union office and have the staff continue to work from home. I think we are working more now than ever before as we deal with every agency at one time while also making sure that our members' supplemental benefits continue without interruption. This is no easy task," she said.

"Then the PAUSE order came, which was a great call, but a scary reality," Blair-Batte said. "No one should really want to leave their homes right now anyway. Mostly everyone I've spoken to is taking advantage of delivery services even if they weren't before. No one wants to be outside and exposed if they absolutely don't have to be right now. And this is why we are so concerned about our essential members. However, we applaud them on the work they are doing daily. Our members who are essential workers are brave first responders as well."

New York State on PAUSE was supposed to end on April 15; however, the governor recently extended that to at least April 29. While there is no curfew in place, on April 6 he did increase the fine from \$500 to \$1,000 for

violating the state's physical distancing policy to help address the lack of adherence to the six-foot distancing protocols.

Administrative Manager Patrice Norwood (NYC Transit Authority) said she hopes the increased fines become a deterrent for those who just aren't taking the pandemic serious enough.

"We have a lot of people who are scrambling to stay safe. They are frontline workers risking their own lives every day to save the lives of others and to keep the city operating and safe. I'm really proud of those people and very thankful for them," Norwood said. "Then there are those who still aren't taking this seriously at all, and those are the ones we have to worry about. They don't seem to be impacted by what's going on around them."

Retired Administrative Manager Clendenen C. Watkins believes that the coronavirus outbreak has "made a definite impact on the movement and lifestyle of citizens."

"Nothing here is the same as before, nor does it make sense anymore. Airports have temporarily closed, medical supplies are non-existent, and people are practicing social distancing. The entertainment industry that is the pulse of New York is M.I.A. and then there are the lucky few who haven't been downsized, laid off, or lost their jobs entirely who are working from home for the first time. Stressful? You bet. Inconvenient? Definitely. Scary? Without a doubt. But we are here for the long haul and helping our neighbors as best we can to get through this," Watkins said.

Helping neighbors and sticking together in a crisis is what makes New Yorkers strong. In fact, the Twitter hashtag #NewYorkStrong can be found more than 17,500 times in a search. #NYCStrong, almost 24,500. This goes to show the strength, resilience, and determination of those living and working in the five boroughs and surrounding communities. In fact, every night at 7:00, New Yorkers open their windows and clap in unison for two minutes to show support for frontline workers fighting to save lives — doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, EMTs, paramedics, first responders. #ClapBecauseWeCareNYC has become the way New Yorkers are able to show just how much they appreciate everything that healthcare workers and first responders are doing to save lives during this pandemic that caught everyone off guard.

Administrative Manager and Shop Steward Vivian Ramos said that the coronavirus pandemic is a health hazard she never thought she would experience in her lifetime. As a nonessential worker in the New York City Comptroller's Office, she is one of the Local 1180 members who is able to work from home.

"We were told to work from home on March 13. Most of us still went in on Friday because we were not prepared to work from home yet since we had to be issued laptops. We were all pretty overwhelmed because there was talk about working from home, but when we left Thursday, everything was still normal," she said.

"I never thought we would see something like this. It's worse than 9/11 and is mentally wreaking havoc on the entire city," Ramos said. "I don't think it was taken seriously enough in the beginning. I pray we return to some type of normalcy soon. I am scared to say the least, but we are constantly receiving emails from Local 1180 and have been since the beginning."

Watkins said life is different now in the midst of the pandemic, and probably will be for the foreseeable future. Norwood agrees.

"This pandemic has changed our lives," Norwood said. "I think initially people are going to be apprehensive about everything when this big scare is finally over, but eventually life will go back to normal. It's just a matter of when people will return to their regular lives. I don't think this is going to change our whole way of thinking because as a nation we just tend to take things for granted. Even people who have been personally touched by the coronavirus at some point will more than likely return to life as usual. That's just the nature of the beast. But then again, how long can we go on being scared?"

Jaquana Elder, Health Care Program Plan Analyst at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, is taking the coronavirus pandemic harder than most. She lost two very close friends in one week to the virus, including Shop Steward Priscilla Carrow, who passed away from the virus on March 30 (see page 18).

"I'm sitting at my desk hearing 'Team 700' over and over again. It's very heartbreaking. The nurses, doctors, EMS, clerical and maintenance staff, and technicians are all working around the clock because of what's going on right now," Elder said. "I also worked in the emergency room, but I haven't been there in the last three weeks because it was just too overwhelming to watch how many people were coming through."

"Team 700" is the code used at Elmhurst that summons a medical team when a patient's heart has stopped. Prior to COVID-19, that page may have been heard at Elmhurst once or twice a week. Now, however, it's a constant refrain. That kind of emotional toll would be a drain on anyone, which is why mental health counselors across the country are reporting that the coronavirus pandemic is going to have lingering effects on emotional health for quite some time.

"Me and Priscilla were on the phone on March 23 talking about how we weren't going back into work for a few days because it was just a little too hectic and also very sad," Elder said. "Then on March 30, my dear friend passed on. It's very heartbreaking coming into this hospital knowing we now have three refrigerated trucks with somebody's loved ones in there. It's really hard and sad to come to work these days."

So many COVID-19 patients have died at Elmhurst, that several refrigerated trucks are stationed outside to hold the bodies. In response to the harrowing number of deaths at the Queens hospital, Elmhurst is offering counseling and coronavirus testing for their employees.

PAA Stephanie Sorillo (HRA) said that New York City has never seen a tragedy that lasted this long and impacted so many.

"The loss of our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers has been heart-breaking and we will never forget them. We appreciate our dedicated workers for all they do and we are grateful to our essential workers who put their lives on the front line and remain strong," Sorillo said. "The coronavirus pandemic has really been a wake-up call that none of us are infallible. The virus has impacted so many people and taken far too many lives. This is something none of us ever could have imagined. For those who have continued to report to work every day, we owe a tremendous amount of gratitude. They have endured more in one day than the rest of us have endured in a week."

WHY QUEENS?

Queens stands out for having two of nation's largest airports, the Unisphere in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, for having hosted the 1964 World's Fair. It's also known for CitiField, home of the Mets, and the Billie Jean King Tennis Center, home to the U.S. Open Tennis tournament. Now Queens is becoming famous for having emerged as New York City's coronavirus epicenter.

Queens is not the most populous of the five boroughs. That honor belongs to Kings (Brooklyn) with more than 2.6 million residents. And it's definitely not the most densely populated. Clearly that's New York (Manhattan).

So how did Queens County, and more specifically, Elmhurst Hospital, become the epicenter of New York City's pandemic, dealing with the greatest number of coronavirus-related deaths?

According to at least one published report, experts say the borough is home to a large number of essential-service-providing city employees, all of whom must continue to report to work instead of being able to telework during the pandemic.

With more than 120 unique languages spoken in Queens, government and community leaders are questioning whether important COVID-19 information and social distancing guidelines are reaching residents in languages they can understand.

Queens has about half the number of hospital beds per thousand people than Manhattan. Exacerbating the problem is that there are just 10 hospitals for the borough's 2.2 million residents, with a huge portion of that population extremely dependent on Elmhurst. ■