

Filipino Home Care Workers: Unseen Frontliners & Essential Workers in the COVID-19 Fight

Bulosan Center for Filipinx Studies



Filipino health care workers in Los Angeles

While there has been much attention on health care frontliners, mainly doctors and nurses working in hospitals around the country to fight COVID-19, there are numerous frontline workers who provide health and other kinds of essential care labor whose work has largely been unseen. Filipinos are overrepresented among health care workers in hospitals around the country. As one recent news report puts it, “Nursing ranks are filled with Filipino Americans. The pandemic is taking an outsized toll on them.”¹ However, Filipinos also tend to be overrepresented in other care-related jobs that have not yet captured national headlines. Based on preliminary data collected by the Bulosan Center, nearly 40% of respondents report that a member of their households work in healthcare yet only 3% of respondents report having been tested for COVID-19. Additionally, 13% of respondents report that their employers do not provide adequate personal protective equipment. The experiences of Filipino care providers--from health care workers working in nursing homes to caregivers employed in residential care facilities for the elderly and other kinds of care workers in non-hospital or home-based care facilities are the focus of this report.

Health Care in Non-Hospital Settings

Recent reports from the California Department of Public Health indicate that nursing homes have been sites for the spread of COVID-19; they have been described as “death pits” but the phenomenon has garnered little attention until now. Thousands of health care workers in California’s nursing homes have contracted COVID-19.² Filipino Americans constitute a large proportion of California’s health care workforce. Over 20% of California’s nurses are Filipino. Nationally, Filipinos constitute 30% of the immigrant nurse population.³ While most nurses in California work in acute hospital settings, 6.1% work

in nursing homes, extended care facilities, or skilled nursing facilities and 2.4% work in home health agencies.⁴ Beyond nursing, almost a third of Filipinos work in health care related jobs. As mentioned above, nearly 40% of respondents of Filipinx Count report having a household member working in health care.⁵ The statistics on Filipino nurses and other health care workers suggest that revelations about COVID-19 spread in nursing homes will have a disproportionate impact on Filipino health care workers and by extension, their families.

Though attention has now been paid on nursing homes, the fact is long term services and support (LTSS), which is a continuum of medical and social service care, is also being provided in other kinds of settings including residential care facilities for the elderly (RCFEs). Indeed, California has 6 times more RCFEs than nursing homes.⁶ Reporting from the California Department of Social Services on COVID-19 spread in these settings,

however, has not been provided. To what extent healthcare workers in nursing homes, RCFEs or other facilities are being provided adequate protections from COVID-19 is an issue of grave concern. RCFEs are notorious for failing to comply with basic labor standards and wage requirements.⁷ Under conditions of COVID-19, it is quite possible that necessary precautions against COVID-19 spread are not being followed.

Two Crises of Care for Home Care Workers

Notably, many of those employed in RCFEs may not necessarily be formally categorized as “health care workers,” yet they provide vital forms of care labor. Home care workers such as caregivers to the elderly, personal attendants and home health aides are considered essential workers during this pandemic — providing in-home care for the most vulnerable populations without sufficient protections for themselves.⁸ In fact, Filipino/a migrants working as caregivers are in the middle of two crises in the current moment.

The first existed before the COVID-19 pandemic as the aging Baby Boomer generation (born between 1946-1964) have continued to need specialized care in their post-retirement years. Many Filipino/a migrant home care workers have answered this call through a variety of formal care employment from one-on-one care (both full time and part time) in private homes, assisted living facilities to working with 2 other caregivers in shifts at RCFEs. Caregiving consist of helping with activities “such as bathing, grooming, toileting, laundry, feeding, cooking, ambulation assistance, house cleaning, sanctioned medical care, patient lifting, and basic companionship”⁹ in these various settings. However, reports have documented that the existing models

of long term care for the elderly have poor inspection frequency which can result in deleterious effects on both caregivers and their patients

Multiple tenets of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) are frequently violated by RCFEs through denying workers’ wages, forcing caregivers to work beyond eight hours even as staff-patient ratios increase in RCFEs, while complaints about care in RCFEs are often lost in a broken complaint system.¹⁰ Meanwhile, though Cal/OSHA’s standards require employers to protect their workers from infectious diseases like COVID-19. Workers who provide “household domestic service,” which is related to the home care work provided by caregivers, are excluded from Cal/OSHA’s protections.¹¹

This first care crisis in the demand of home care workers and the industry’s poor regulatory mechanisms had already put Filipinos/as in precarious positions as disposable, exploited and, at times, even victims to labor trafficking.¹² Past reports show that caregivers under this existing crisis suffer lasting physical health injuries from their work.¹³ Now, under the second crisis of COVID-19, it is clear that home care worker health has and will continue to suffer with the risk of infection and lack of workplace protections.

BULOSAN CENTER
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About the Center

The Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies continues Carlos Bulosan’s legacy of uplifting the voices of the most marginalized in the Filipino community in the United States and the diaspora. This is being done through community-engaged research that broadly disseminates knowledge about Filipinos for the purpose of advancing our rights and welfare.

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Home care workers work with populations with the highest risk of COVID-19 infection: those ages 65 or older with pre-existing conditions and chronic illnesses. In the various non-hospital settings for home care work, access to employer provided PPE is low. Additionally, home care workers' workplaces are in private homes or their teams are small in shifts in RCFEs, thus, their ability to organize with other home care workers and advocate for these needs are lessened. This second crisis compounds on the first, and the confluence of both have put caregivers and home care workers in general,

hanging in the balance. Unlike health care workers in hospital settings or other medical institutions, home care workers are often invisible as frontline workers. Neglected by media attention, Filipino caregivers and home care workers in the United States and Canada¹⁴ are in a hazardous situation given the lack of support for positive health outcomes for this sector of care workers. There is a mounting need to include caregivers and home care workers into the the social and political narrative of those who are in need of policy protections, under the COVID-19 crisis and when it is over.



Conclusion

This report indicates that there are multiple policy gaps that legislators will need to address to ensure that unseen frontliners and essential workers are getting the kinds of support their need during this current crisis:

- Better reporting on COVID-19 spread in non-hospital institutions like RCFEs and other In-Home Support Services programs;
- Ensure that state efforts in disseminating PPEs include nursing homes, RCFEs, IHSS programs and other sites where care workers are employed;
- Better enforcement of the FSLA and the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in RCFEs, IHSS programs and other sites where care workers are employed;
- Passage of laws like SB 1257 The Health and Safety for All Workers Act to include domestic service workers, including caregivers and home care workers, in basic labor protections including CAL/OSHA health and safety regulations.

Help us collect more data on the Filipinx American community by participating in the Filipin[x]s Count! The Filipinx/Filipinx-American Health and Well-Being Survey

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