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# Custodial Staff Protect Us From The Novel Coronavirus, But Who Is Protecting Them?

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MARCH 27, 2020

10.1377/hblog20200326.547179



In recent weeks hospitals and medical institutions across the country have enacted policies to protect medical students and medical personnel from COVID-19.



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These policies have ranged from restrictions for medical students seeing patients on the wards to switching from in-person classes to online coursework.

[Harvard College](#), was one of the first universities to require students to evacuate their on-campus housing. Shortly after Harvard Medical School issued a similar request. Students quickly packed their belongings and purchased flights back home— I was one them. While some of us have viewed these policies as unjust or inconvenient, we followed them in an effort to preserve the public health of our society. However, many of these policies have been selective in who they protect most. As college campuses close and hospital wards become more restrictive, one group of people will have to come into work regardless of the severity of coronavirus spread: custodial staff.

At institutions across the country custodial staff are considered [essential personnel](#), meaning that in the event of a snowstorm or an impending pandemic, they are still expected to come to work. I was surprised to learn this after speaking with a custodial staff member at Harvard. I listened intently as we discussed their fears surrounding the coronavirus and their sense of unpreparedness on how to protect themselves. This troubled me because like many students, the custodial staff at my institution have become like family to me, but right now I fear their health could be in jeopardy.

There are nearly 4.4 million [custodial and domestic workers](#) in the U.S., and despite the fact they are on the frontlines protecting our communities, public discourse and policy related to COVID-19 has largely disregarded their safety and contributions. The [CDC](#) reports that “current evidence suggests that novel coronavirus may

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## Cite As

“Custodial Staff Protect Us From The Novel Coronavirus, But Who Is Protecting Them?, ”  
Health Affairs Blog,  
March 27, 2020.

DOI:

10.1377/hblog20200326.  
547179

remain viable for hours to days on surfaces.” They go on to recognize the “cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces followed by disinfection” as best practice for the prevention of COVID-19 in community settings. As these public health suggestions become policy, we must ask ourselves the following questions: Who is doing the cleaning and who is protecting them?

At inception of COVID-19’s rapid spread in the US, the [Boston Globe](#) published an article about how the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) started to “aggressively” clean and disinfect transit stations and vehicles across Boston. As a regular user of public transportation, I felt a sense of relief after reading this headline. However, upon further reflection I realized that the MBTA employees cleaning, similar to those cleaning at hospitals and medical institutions, are likely low-income, with limited access to sick days for work.

MBTA wasn’t the only organization demanding more cleaning services. According to [ZipRecruiter](#), COVID-19 has led to a 75% increase in year-over-year listings for cleaners, cleaning companies and janitors on their website—highlighting a rapid demand for these services across industries. As our society’s demand for cleaning has increased, sanitary worker’s exposure to coronavirus (due to limited physical and social safety nets) has increased as well. This threat is compounded by the fact that these individuals may have [risk factors](#) like chronic disease, which may contribute to their risk of disease contraction.

Therefore, during this time of social unrest and rapid policy development leaders should act expeditiously to ensure the health and wellness of custodial staff is not an afterthought. In order to protect these communities,

decision makers should consider the following:

## **Comprehensive COVID-19 Education, Training And Protection**

It is important that institutions take the initiative to provide comprehensive, accessible information to custodial staff about coronavirus. This education should cover how workers can protect themselves, their families and their communities from the spread of the virus. Educational material should be available in the native language of all custodial staff members since for many for many of these workers English may not be their first language. This should especially be taken into consideration by employers when sending out mass emails and communication about COVID-19 to their employees.

In addition to education and training, physical protections for custodial staff should be obligatory. Recently there has been an important push to provide healthcare workers with appropriate access to personal protective equipment (PPE). While custodial staff members in the healthcare setting benefit from this advocacy, those who work outside of the hospital setting have be largely excluded from this conversation. While obtaining PPE for healthcare workers is understandably our most urgent policy concern currently, we must not forget about blue-collar workers outside the healthcare setting also in need of PPE. Thus, PPE for these individuals should also be included in future policy implementation and advocacy.

## **Accessible Affordable Healthcare For All Workers**

While Donald Trump approved the [Families First Coronavirus Virus Response Act](#) offering free coronavirus testing, there has been [uncertainty](#) about coverage for treatment costs. The [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) estimates the out-of-pocket costs for pneumonia hospitalization at approximately \$1,300 for patients with insurance. This is a high cost to pay for low-wage workers who may be living paycheck to paycheck. Costs may be as high as \$20,000 for patients without insurance, an unfortunate reality for many undocumented individuals. These high costs will deter many patients from seeking care even if they are experiencing symptoms. Therefore, governmental emergency funds need to be generated not only for coronavirus testing, but for subsequent treatment as well.

## Paid Leave Policy Implementation for Custodial Staff

In line with The [Service Employees International Union's](#) call to "Protect ALL Workers", it is imperative that employers and policy makers develop policies that do not penalize custodial staff for calling out sick by increasing the number of paid sick days. According to the [data](#) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 7 in 10 low-wage workers do not receive paid sick leave—this often includes custodial workers. Even when they do get paid sick days, they are often limited. Therefore, many workers are disincentivized to stay at home from work when they have symptoms. To help address this problem lawmakers across the country should follow California's lead by offering [disability insurance](#) for workers in quarantine and employers should take advantage of recent [payroll tax credits](#) announced by the U.S. Treasury

for coronavirus-related paid leave.

## Protections And Financial Support For Self-Employed Domestic Workers

The unique challenges of self-employed domestic workers cannot be ignored in our response to COVID-19. They are already among the [most marginalized](#) group of workers in U.S., often facing job insecurity and lack of paid leave. Laws created to keep workers healthy rarely apply to self-employed cleaners (despite the popularity of cleaning-contract apps like [Handy](#)) who primarily care for private homes; for example, the federal [Occupational Safety and Health Act \(OSHA\)](#) excludes them entirely from its protections.

In addition, many self-employed domestic workers are [immigrant women](#), which makes them an especially vulnerable population. They are often underpaid with limited access to public health information in their own language and may lack the financial resources to stock up on emergency preparedness items like food. [Studies](#) have also shown that undocumented individuals are less likely to seek medical care in fear of being deported, which discourages undocumented workers from seeking medical care even in the wake of a deadly virus like COVID-19. Our current policies have been inadequate in their protection of this community of workers and we must work consciously to elucidate their lived experiences in future policy development.

## A Culture Shift: Acknowledgement For The Contributions Of Custodial Staff

Finally, we as a community must work together to create

a culture that values and acknowledges the ongoing contributions of custodial staff to prevent the spread of coronavirus. They are the silent superheroes behind our public health efforts and deserve to be celebrated for the good they do for our institutions. One custodial staff member I spoke with told me about how much it means to him to be “in the know” about recent developments regarding policy updates around coronavirus. It is important to not leave our custodial staff on the margins as we move forward in this effort. Let’s bring them into the conversation and support them in their efforts to keep our spaces clean.

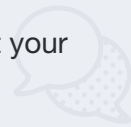
For many of us the spread of coronavirus is unprecedented territory. Every day it feels like we are on the brink of new knowledge that will lead us closer to quelling its spread. My only hope is that as we translate our discoveries into solutions, we support those who are on the frontlines valiantly defending our society’s health one clean at a time.



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**Lance Fury** · 5 days ago



I plan to message my Congressmen to include custodial staff in upcoming COVID-19 legislation. Please consider taking a couple minutes to do the same in your state.

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**Jim Recht, MD** · 5 days ago



Thank you for this thoughtful and timely set of reminders.

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