Awareness of Paid Sick Leave among New York City Restaurant Workers

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Abstract Restaurant workers are less likely to have paid sick leave (PSL) benefits than other professions, despite the fact that they handle food and interact with the public. In this study, we collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data on PSL awareness among New York City’s restaurant workers and the factors that produced these levels of awareness. We found that 62% of surveyed workers were aware of NYC’s law, and that successful outreach requires building broad awareness and ensuring trustworthy sources of information with multiple points of contact. Our research also highlights the importance of immigrant populations in PSL outreach.

Keywords Paid sick leave · Awareness · Restaurant workers · Policy implementation

Restaurant workers are less likely to have paid sick leave (PSL) benefits than other professions [1], despite the fact that they handle food and interact with the public. They also need these benefits to protect their health and that of their families [2–7]. Passage of PSL laws has accelerated rapidly

recently, with cities leading the enactment of these policies [8]. PSL laws are a major victory for American public health, but significant implementation challenges exist, particularly among small employers who are common in the restaurant industry. Efforts to raise awareness of PSL requires significant financial and human resources. The New York City (NYC) Earned Sick Time Act (Paid Sick Leave Law) went into effect on April 1, 2014, and provides employees the right to take time off from work to care for themselves or a family member [9]. The restaurant industry in NYC offers an instructive case study of PSL outreach and education because of its size and diversity, which present a range of challenges to awareness-raising efforts.

In this study, we collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data on PSL awareness levels among NYC’s restaurant workers and the factors that produced these levels of awareness. Specifically, we conducted an anonymous survey targeting restaurant workers’ awareness and experience with PSL. The survey was administered in Spanish, Chinese, and English to 151 NYC adult restaurant workers aged 18 and over in summer 2015 and spring 2016. Recruitment occurred through street intercept and at community service organizations, focusing on communities in which a higher density of restaurant workers lived [10]. Though there was some variability between subgroups of restaurant workers by language and location of restaurant, the overall awareness level reported was 62% (Table 1) suggesting that NYC stakeholders may have disseminated PSL information more effectively than anticipated. To better understand these efforts, we thus conducted seven semi-structured interviews with individuals from six

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Table 1 Respondent characteristics and awareness of PSL Law

	Number of respondents	Percent of respondents aware of PSL Law* (%)
All eligible respondents	145 ^a	62
Type of restaurant		
Chain	43	81
Independent	100	53*
Occupation ^b		
Back of the house	58	74
Front of the house	87	54*
Survey language		
English	38	71
Spanish	56	81
Chinese	51	35*
Number of employees within a business		
5–9	17	47
10–19	51	67
20+	76	63
Restaurant location		
Manhattan	86	78
Outer boroughs	59	39*
Gender		
Female	49	49
Male	95	68
Transgendered	1	100
Nativity		
Foreign born	112	58
US born	33	76
Age		
<30	47	70
30+	98	58

* indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level

^a Responses may not always equal 145 due to missing values

^b Front of the house denotes jobs that interface with customers such as wait staff, busboys, bar staff, and hosts; back of the house denotes jobs that do not regularly interface with customers such as chefs and dishwashers

organizations, including the lead city agency (CA), advocacy/research organizations (AROs), and immigrant/worker organizations (IWOs) during spring/summer 2016.

Our qualitative interviews indicated that outreach and education required building broad awareness and ensuring reliable, trustworthy sources of information with multiple points of contact. The strategies used to educate

NYC workers and businesses varied based on the audience, as displayed in Box 1 and Table 2.

Box 1: Brief summary of lead city agency's outreach and education activities

“New York City’s extensive, multi-phased education campaign reached more than six million New Yorkers in 26 languages, through extensive advertisements in subways, buses, and local and foreign-language print media, radio, and on television. [The CA] also participated in approximately 1100 events where staff distributed more than 2 million brochures about paid sick leave.” (32) As the city’s awareness-raising campaign was broad and would reach both workers and business owners, there was an attempt to position the law as a “win-win” as evidenced by the two campaign taglines; first “FEEL 100% WORK 100%” and later “NYC WORKS BETTER with PAID SICK LEAVE.”

The city also leveraged its many contacts with city residents to raise awareness of PSL. For instance, they included information via newsletters and emails to residents of public housing, broadcast public service announcements about the law in waiting rooms of all public hospitals, and sent information home with public schoolchildren at targeted schools, along with many other agency-based efforts.

Table 2 Strategies used to raise awareness and educate populations about PSL

Target audience	Strategies used
NYC residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press conferences and media coverage, including in languages other than English (All) • Advertisements in subways, buses, and local and foreign-language print media, radio, and on television (Led by CA) • Distribution of over 2 million brochures (Led by CA) • Participation in 1100 events to share information about PSL (Led by CA) • PSL Day of Action (7/16/14): 1400 volunteers distributed multilingual PSL palm cards at 150 subway stops and other targeted locations (Led by CA; many organization types participated) • Newsletters and other PSL announcements through multiple city agencies (Led by CA)
Workers and restaurant workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive PSL website with worker-specific portal and FAQs (CA) • Training organizers at IWOs in the details of the PSL law (AROs) • Word-of-mouth PSL education to/by their members via an organizing model (IWOs) • Targeted awareness-raising (including PSL) for employees of businesses with multiple wage and benefit violations (IWOs)
Business owners and restaurant owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive PSL website with employer-specific portal and FAQs (CA) • Direct mailings (CA, IA) • Trainings, forums, seminars, live Q&As (CA, IA) • Open houses (CA) • Webinars (CA) • Small business education walks (CA) • Sick leave timekeeping tools (CA, ARO) • Distribution of sick leave model forms (CA, ARO) • Support via membership representatives (IA) • Telephone helpline (IA) • Word-of-mouth PSL education and support to/by their members via an organizing model (IWOs)

Almost all organizations interviewed highlighted the importance of immigrant populations in NYC's PSL efforts. An ARO representative spoke of PSL as a "new labor standard," an employee benefit that many American workers do not expect to receive and that immigrants especially might not expect or be aware of. While the CA conducted workshops in a variety of languages, IWOs used a labor-intensive but effective organizing model in which IWO members educate fellow workers and owners who they often know personally. These efforts emphasized the role of the messenger and meaningful communication.

The outreach successes achieved in NYC suggest an array of approaches that—more widely applied—might lead to high awareness levels across populations. These include fostering diverse partnerships, using multiple outreach channels and models, and ensuring that AROs and community-based IWOs receive adequate funding to serve as enduring resources to community members. Our survey findings support these recommendations, suggesting that workers in more isolated language groups located outside of Manhattan were less well served by PSL outreach efforts.

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