

An illustration in the top right corner shows two hands, one light-skinned and one dark-skinned, both adorned with yellow henna designs. They are gently holding a small, brown, cylindrical object, possibly a nail or a piece of wood. The background of the illustration features stylized blue flowers with white outlines.

# FROM OUR OWN VOICES

VIETNAMESE NAIL SALON WORKERS' EXPERIENCES  
IN MASSACHUSETTS' NAIL SALON INDUSTRY  
BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

FULL REPORT | MAY 2021





### **ABOUT VIETNAMESE AMERICAN INITIATIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT (VIETAID)**

VietAID was founded in 1994 by community leaders and residents who believed that a community development corporation would provide comprehensive economic development programs and services to alleviate poverty and advance civic participation in the Fields Corner Vietnamese community of Dorchester. VietAID's mission is to build a strong Vietnamese community and a vibrant Fields Corner through the following measures: promoting civic engagement and community building; developing affordable housing and commercial space; providing small business technical assistance and micro-enterprise development; and offering high-quality child-care services.

### **ABOUT GREATER BOSTON LEGAL SERVICES (GBLS)**

GBLS assists survivors of domestic violence, homeless families, elders, people with disabilities, homeowners facing foreclosure, tenants in no-fault evictions, low-wage workers, families with no source of income, and immigrants facing persecution. Annually, GBLS provides legal assistance to more than 9,000 families and individuals who live at or below 125% of the federal poverty standard. GBLS also provides legal counsel to dozens of community-based groups and organizations and conducts strategic impact advocacy to bring about positive systematic change throughout the region and state.

### **ABOUT ASIAN OUTREACH UNIT**

The Asian Outreach Unit (AOU) at GBLS provides bilingual and bicultural legal services and organizing support to Asian immigrants seeking access to justice. Through community-based intake, AOU creates access to legal services for low-income Asian Americans. AOU also strengthens movement building by collaborating with grassroots groups organizing low-income tenants, workers, immigrants, refugees, and voters. AOU's community lawyering model responds to the day-to-day needs of the Asian American community and inspires broader work against systemic inequality and oppression.

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# KEY TAKEAWAYS

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## **1 THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY SERVES AS A BEDROCK FOR THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN MASSACHUSETTS.**

When the nail salon industry struggles, whole immigrant communities also struggle.

## **2 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED EXISTING FLAWS IN THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY.**

The commission-based, seasonal structure of nail salons meant workers received little to no income during the pandemic. At the same time, workers and owners faced barriers in accessing relief options, benefits programs, and health and safety guidelines.

## **3 NAIL SALON WORK IS HIGHLY GENDERED, RACIALIZED, AND CLASSED.**

The nail salon workforce overwhelmingly consists of low-wage adult Asian immigrant women. So while nail salon workers were at the economic frontlines during a global pandemic, they also faced inadequate support due to language barriers, technology access, and lack of community-specific outreach.

## **4 THE INDUSTRY WILL NEED IMMENSE SUPPORT TO COME BACK FROM THE PANDEMIC.**

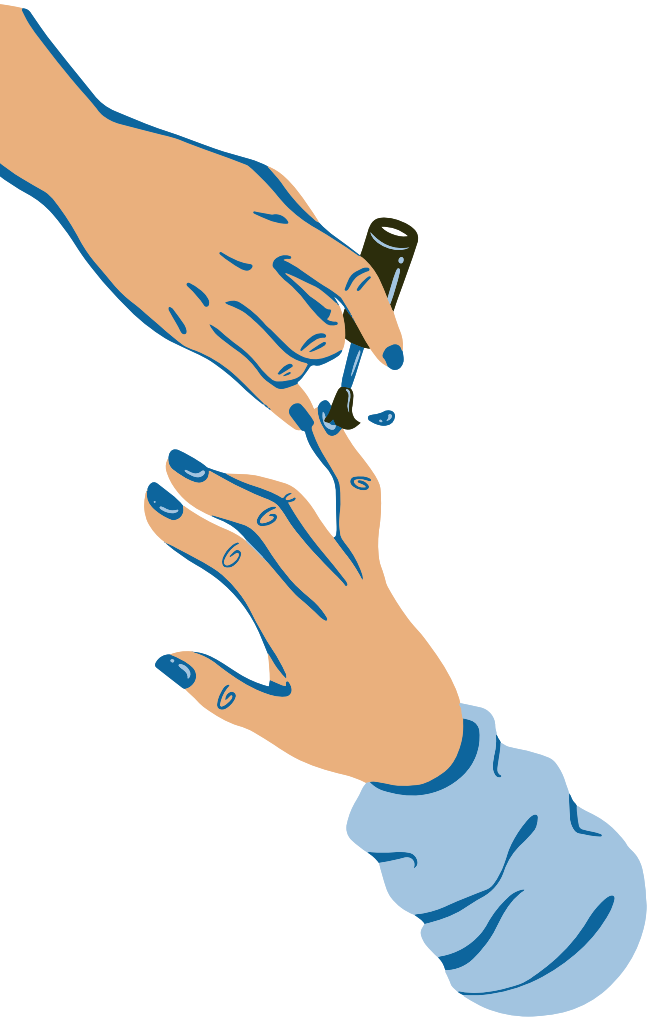
Nail salon workers and owners relied on informal networks, non-profit organizations, and for-profit businesses for support. Future policies, funding, and programs should seek input from community members and advocates to tailor their efforts to the needs of the industry.

## **5 STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO THE INDUSTRY, SUCH AS WORKERS' CENTERS, ACCESSIBLE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS, AND WORKER COOPERATIVES, CAN MAKE SALONS MORE SUSTAINABLE FOR BOTH WORKERS AND OWNERS.**

Building these support systems for nail salon workers and owners will lead to a safer, healthier, and more stable industry in the long term.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The nail salon industry heavily supports Vietnamese communities across the United States, including in Massachusetts. Massachusetts has a significant nail salon industry that serves as a pillar for many Vietnamese women. Nail salon workers and owners support families, friends, and community members through informal networks of support, widespread dissemination of information on social media, and participation in local economies within ethnic enclaves. As a result, COVID-19's impacts on the nail salon industry affect whole immigrant communities, not just individual workers and owners.

Originally projected to grow in the next decade, the nail salon industry drastically shrank in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This dramatic decline resulted from flaws that already existed in the nail salon industry. Prior to the pandemic, nail salon workers cited issues with the industry's seasonal nature, commission structure, occupation health conditions, and language barriers. The pandemic forced low-wage nail salon workers to receive little income without the safety net of earnings during their busy seasons. At the same time, owners struggled to keep their businesses running and leaned on numerous small business relief options.

However, because most of the nail salon workforce identifies as low-wage Asian immigrant women, nail salon workers and owners faced the brunt of structural violence during the COVID-19 pandemic without deep institutional support. For example:

- Workers and owners faced hurdles to accessing benefits, such as misclassification, immigration status, lack of information on eligibility, and language barriers.
- Workers and owners did not receive much support in reopening safe and healthy workplaces. Most of the onus was on owners to remodel the physical infrastructure of the salon with limited funding, while workers and owners divided costs for personal protective equipment.
- Workers and owners feared anti-Asian violence in the nail salon. Yet current proposals to protect Asian communities that include the criminal legal system have received mixed reactions from nail salon workers, who may fear interactions with law enforcement due to their vulnerable conditions.

The industry will need immense support from all stakeholders to recover from the pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted that non-profit organizations, community-led programs, and informal networks play a crucial role in supporting nail salon workers and owners. Future efforts should lean on these groups to inform how policies, funding, and programs can support the Vietnamese nail salon industry. Consumers should also consider how they can use their power to support small businesses.

Transformative changes to the industry can make salons more sustainable for both workers and owners by addressing concerns regarding employment structure, health and safety, and language access. Potential models of support can include development of workers' centers, accessible workforce development programs, and nail salon worker cooperatives.

VietAID and AOU seek to provide a nuanced assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on the Vietnamese nail salon industry in Massachusetts. This report is grounded in 52 extensive interviews with workers from 2016-2020, as well as survey responses from 51 workers and 15 owners during the pandemic. The recommendations are aimed at creating a more equitable and sustainable nail salon industry for workers and owners.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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**SUPPORT SMALL BUSINESSES BY TIPPING NAIL SALON WORKERS, PURCHASING GIFT CARDS, LEAVING GOOD REVIEWS FOR THE BUSINESS, AND SHARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA.**



**HIRE BILINGUAL AND BICULTURAL ADVOCATES IN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES FOR OUTREACH, ADVOCACY, AND SERVICES FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY.**



**PARTNER EXTENSIVELY WITH WORKERS, OWNERS, AND TRUSTED NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS TO CREATE APPROPRIATE POLICIES AND SYSTEMS FOR OUTREACH, DIRECT SERVICES, AND SUPPORT.**



**INITIATE SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT, FUNDING, AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS FOR IMMIGRANTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY.**



**SUPPORT STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO THE INDUSTRY, INCLUDING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A VIETNAMESE WORKERS' CENTER, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS, AND WORKER COOPERATIVES.**

# MASSACHUSETTS NAIL SALON PROJECT

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Launched by VietAID and Greater Boston Legal Services' Asian Outreach Unit (AOU), the Massachusetts Nail Salon Project seeks to provide services and support workers to address the challenges facing the nail salon industry. We collaborate with organizations across the nation to uplift nail salon workers' experiences. Although our organizations had informally addressed the needs of Vietnamese nail salon workers for many years, this project directly centers the perspectives of workers to understand and advocate for a more sustainable work environment.

The need for a sustainable industry was never more apparent than in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced Massachusetts nail salons to undergo a complete shutdown, prolonged slowdown in business, and multiple alterations to the physical setup of the salon workspace. Workers and owners faced difficulties accessing relief and benefits, supporting their families, and accessing information in their native language. In response to the deluge of nail salon workers seeking help due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VietAID and AOU shifted resources to rapidly respond to workers' needs.

This report sheds light on the unique experiences of Vietnamese nail salon workers in Massachusetts both before and during the pandemic. For the purposes of this report, nail salon workers include nail technicians and other workers who work at the nail salon, including lash estheticians, professional waxers, and facialists. Many nail technicians now hold these licenses in addition to their manicurist license. All of our interviews and most of our surveys highlight workers' nuanced experiences. But we recognize that workers' experiences in the industry are intertwined with those of owners. We were also able to survey some owners during the pandemic given the interconnectedness of the community's experiences in the industry.

**This report is a collection of findings from 52 qualitative interviews with workers from 2016-2020, survey responses from 51 workers and 15 owners during the pandemic, and informal stories from our community partners.** All data displayed in graphs are based only on surveys collected during the pandemic. All quotes and stories are from qualitative interviews translated from Vietnamese into English. All names in stories have been changed to protect workers' safety and privacy. Any images attached to nail salon workers' stories are not representative of workers in any capacity.

Our findings uplift voices of those who are most impacted by the industry. As the industry continues to face challenges during the pandemic, we hope that this report can provide useful recommendations for supporting all nail salon staff and sustaining local nail salons in the long term.



# TO SUPPORT NAIL SALON WORKERS IN THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY, WE...

ASSISTED OVER

**1,000**

WORKERS WITH APPLICATIONS  
AND ISSUES WITH  
UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

DISTRIBUTED

**300,000+**

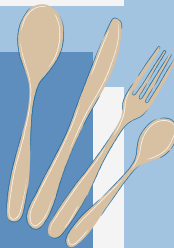
POUNDS OF FRESH PRODUCE TO  
PREVENT FOOD INSECURITY  
WITHIN THE COMMUNITY



SERVED

**63,861**

HOT MEALS TO COMMUNITY  
MEMBERS IN NEED



PROVIDED FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO

**300+**

FAMILIES WITH UNSTABLE  
IMMIGRATION STATUS THROUGH  
THE ASIAN COMMUNITY  
EMERGENCY RELIEF FUND

LAUNCHED A VIRTUAL

**LEGAL OFFICE**

ON FACEBOOK FOR THE  
VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY

HOSTED A JOINT

**TOWN HALL**

TO INFORM LOW-WAGE AND  
IMMIGRANT WORKERS ABOUT  
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE AND  
RETURN TO WORK

# BACKGROUND ON THE U.S. NAIL SALON INDUSTRY

## HOW THE U.S. NAIL SALON INDUSTRY BECAME DEFINED BY RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS

The nail salon industry has shifted from a luxury to a common service throughout U.S. history. Until the early 1900s, manicures in the U.S. were a luxury designated for the upper class.<sup>1</sup> But technological developments in the 20th century made nail services more affordable for middle- and working-class women.<sup>1</sup> The increasing popularity of nail trends also encouraged the general public to see manicures as a routine service.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1970s, colonialism, war, and changes in immigration policy shifted the nail salon labor force to a predominantly Asian immigrant women workforce. The Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 increased the immigration quota for Asian countries and reversed past decades of restrictive immigration policies.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the War in Southeast Asia during the 1970s and 1980s, many refugees fled Southeast Asia and resettled in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The nail salon industry expanded due to low barriers of entry, accessible training schools, and referrals from social circles for Vietnamese and other Asian immigrant women.<sup>4</sup>

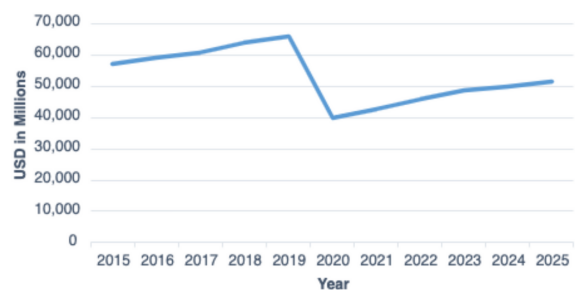
## NAIL SALON INDUSTRY BY THE NUMBERS

Nail salons play a significant role in our local and national economies. As of 2016, the United States had at least 23,745 nail salons.<sup>4</sup> Nail salons are often small businesses, with 92% having fewer than 10 employees.<sup>4</sup> These mom-and-pop shops hire local community members and sustain whole immigrant communities.

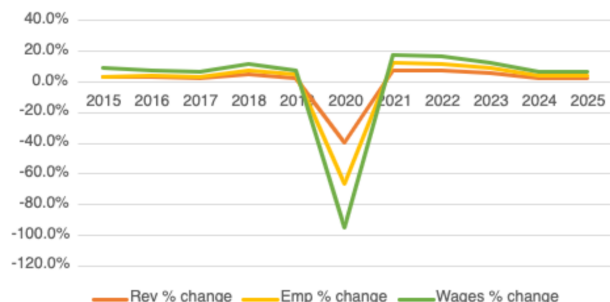
**Originally projected to grow in the next decade, the nail salon industry drastically shrank due to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Employment in the nail salon industry was projected to grow by 13% over the next decade.<sup>4</sup> However, COVID-19 severely impacted the industry. Revenue in the nail salon industry declined by 35% in 2020 due to COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Based on past trends in revenue within the industry, the nail salon industry is expected to take more than 5 years to fully recover to pre-COVID conditions.<sup>5</sup>

PROJECTED REVENUE OF THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY<sup>5</sup>

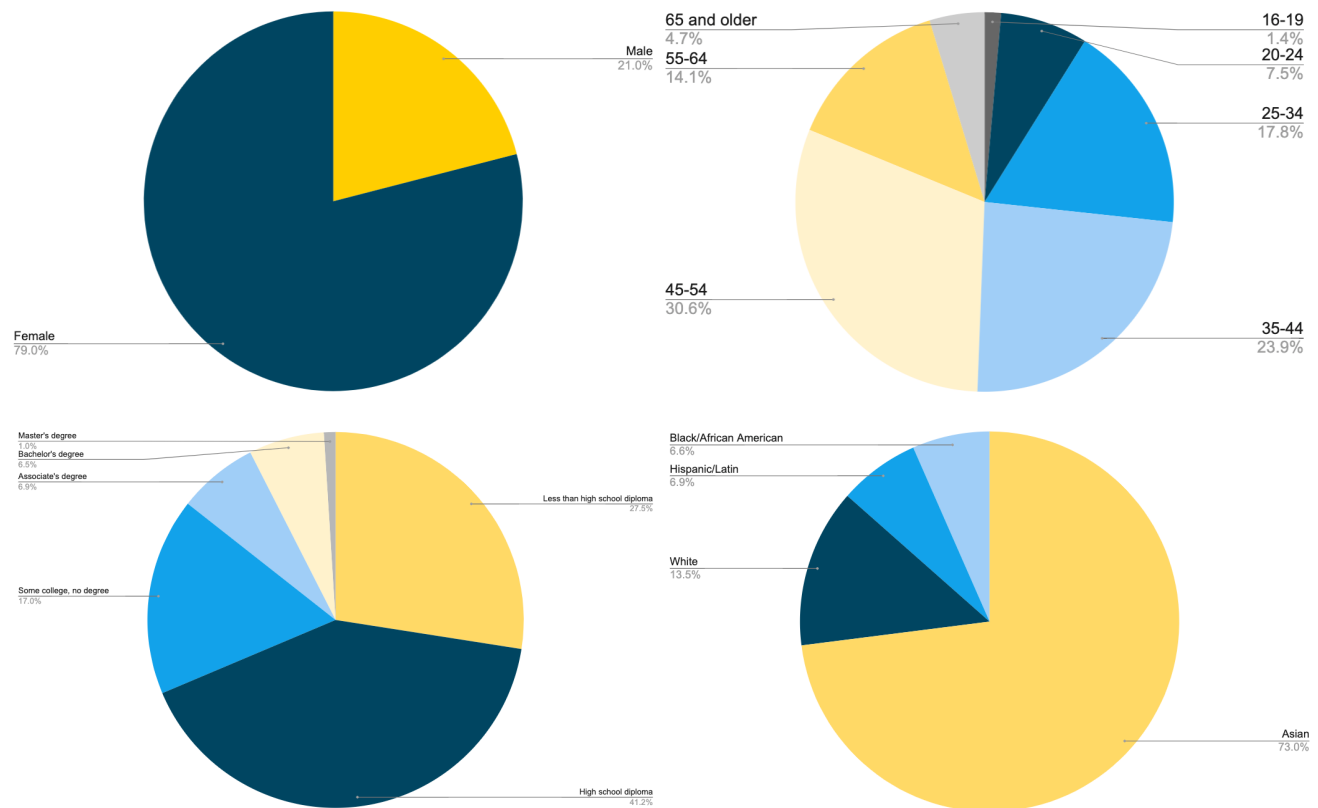


IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY<sup>5</sup>



The nail salon industry impacts a large portion of the working population in the United States. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that there were 155,300 manicurists and pedicurists in 2019, and 214,000 manicurists and pedicurists in 2020.<sup>6</sup> This statistic is likely an undercount, failing to encompass unlicensed nail salon workers and trainees.

**The nail salon workforce overwhelmingly consists of low-wage adult Asian immigrant women.** Nail salon workers reported low levels of English proficiency and educational attainment.<sup>4</sup> While 33% of workers across all industries are classified as low-wage, an overwhelming 78% of nail salon workers are low-wage.<sup>4</sup> The following charts further detail demographics of nail salon workers based on 2019 data from the American Community Survey.<sup>7</sup>



Vietnamese Americans, making up half of the licensed workforce, now dominate the nail salon industry.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, 74% of the foreign-born population of nail salon workers were born in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Even now, Vietnamese people continue to immigrate to the U.S. and join the nail salon workforce.

**Massachusetts has a significant nail salon industry that contains over 1,500 nail salons and 17,000 licensed manicurists.<sup>8</sup> The state's nail salon industry serves as a pillar for many Vietnamese women. In Massachusetts, 73% of nail salon workers identified as women.<sup>7</sup> In Boston, 33% of self-identified Vietnamese females worked in healthcare support and personal care services, which includes manicurists.<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts has a significant Vietnamese population of 53,700.<sup>7</sup> This population is primarily concentrated in Boston, Quincy, Randolph, and Worcester, with many nail salon workers residing in these areas.**

# THE COMPLEX INFRASTRUCTURE OF NAIL SALONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

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On the surface, nail salons in Massachusetts generally have similar physical setups with multiple workstations for manicures and pedicures and may also offer other cosmetology services. But our interviews with workers revealed that within each of these nail salons is a complex internal infrastructure.

## LOW BARRIERS FOR ENTRY

Immigrants and refugees mainly entered the nail salon workforce through social networks, allowing these individuals to navigate past potential barriers, including lack of English proficiency, immigration status, and unvalued professional credentials from other countries.<sup>10</sup> According to interviewed nail salon workers, the nail salon industry is especially easy to enter in Massachusetts due to flexible licensing guidelines, availability of jobs, and expedited interview processes during hiring.<sup>11</sup> Some owners hire workers without licenses or work authorization, but these technicians must work under different standards than licensed technicians. These conditions may include only working on the weekends, providing basic nail services, and receiving a lower wage than other technicians.

Language helps determine Vietnamese workers' preferences for workplaces. Vietnamese nail salon worker-interviewees with limited English proficiency generally expressed a preference for working in a Vietnamese-owned nail salon because of the ability to communicate with owners in their primary language. Workers often only need to communicate in basic English with customers to understand customers' needs. Some workers expressed interest in working at English-dominant nail salons for reasons like perceived pay benefits, paid time off, and consistent wages, but acknowledged the challenges. These salons only interview workers in English and often restrict use of non-English languages around customers.

## IMPACT OF PAY STRUCTURES ON WAGES

Salons pay manicurists by commission or hourly wage, though the commission basis is much more common. In salons operating on a commission basis, the owner takes a percentage of the customer's payment for each service, while the worker gets the remaining portion. Common employee/employer commission rates, which are negotiated at each salon, are 60%/40%, 55%/45%, and 50%/50%. The wages earned in a commission system are entirely dependent on the volume of customers along with supplemental tips. Most workers are not guaranteed a base pay or salary.

"I COULD NEVER WORK AT AN 'AMERICAN' NAIL SALON. IT WOULD BE TOO LONELY WITHOUT VIETNAMESE CO-WORKERS."

"VIETNAMESE TECHNICIANS ARE NOT PROFICIENT IN ENGLISH SO THEY CAN'T WORK IN AMERICAN-OWNED STORES THAT ARE BETTER—HIGHER PAY, VACATION TIME, SET BREAK/LUNCH TIME OR LEAVING WORK WHEN THE STORE SHOULD BE CLOSED."

Misclassification of workers is a common occurrence in the nail salon industry. Most nail salon workers are actually employees and should receive a W2. True independent contractors, on the other hand, are able to set both their own work schedule and the price of services, perform work different in nature from the employing enterprise, and receive a 1099.<sup>12</sup> When workers are misclassified as independent contractors, workers are responsible for state and federal taxes and miss out on certain benefits, including paid sick time, workers' compensation, and unemployment benefits.<sup>12</sup> However, workers may receive higher commission rates if they agree to be classified as independent contractors. Workers may feel compelled to take the immediate benefit of a higher commission rate and pay higher taxes in the long run. In other salons, workers are not given a choice between classification as an employee or independent contractor.

## SEASONAL NATURE, FLUCTUATING PAY

Nail salons experience seasonal customer influx, creating a high risk/high reward pay scenario for workers. The seasonal nature of the industry rewards workers with higher commission wages and more tips in busier seasons, such as holidays, prom season, and warmer weather. In slower seasons, especially winter, customers come in less frequently. Regardless of the season, some workers are expected to be at the salon all day to wait for customers. Commission-based workers are thus more susceptible to being paid below minimum wage during slower seasons. It was not uncommon for workers to report \$200 to \$300 in gross weekly wages for full-time work during the winter. Still, many workers like the commission system because of the potential for high earnings in the summer. They rationalize that earnings in busy seasons may offset low wages during slower seasons.

## INABILITY TO ACCESS BENEFITS

Prior to the pandemic, nail salon workers did not commonly access unemployment benefits due to misclassification and the non-traditional ways in which workers left the workplace. Misclassified workers were ineligible for unemployment benefits because of their independent contractor status. But interviewed employees rarely cited layoff as the reason for leaving their job. Instead, nail salon workers cited factors such as: location; conflict with owner and other workers; childcare obligations; unsafe health conditions; and overall dissatisfaction with the workplace. Due to cultural barriers, fear of retaliation, and ease in finding open positions, workers typically quit and transition to another salon rather than confronting nail salon owners. Quitting voluntarily in these conditions would traditionally make workers ineligible for unemployment benefits. As a result, many workers depended on this ease of accessing new jobs instead of falling back on unemployment benefits.

"MY EMPLOYER LETS ME CHOOSE BETWEEN W2 AND 1099. AT FIRST, I CHOSE W2 WITH A 50/50 COMMISSION, BUT 1099 WORKERS RECEIVE 60/40. I WOULD RATHER RECEIVE MORE MONEY AND PAY HIGHER TAXES THAN BE A W2 WORKER. IT WORKS FOR US BOTH."

## SACRIFICING HER WORK FOR HER CHILDREN

Cece started working in the nail salon industry in 1998. Cece took a break from the industry to care for her disabled children. Cece started working again in 2008, but the work has never been stable. Cece works about 4 days on average to pay for clothes, medical bills, and other expenses.

Cece likes being in the workforce because she feels like it gives more meaning to her life. But because Cece has three children to care for, Cece says that she cannot be selfish. Working during a pandemic is too risky. Although customers have asked her to return to work, Cece has to prioritize her children's safety.



Interviewed nail salon workers cited government benefits, such as food stamps and subsidized health coverage, as a way to supplement low wages and lack of employer-provided benefits. But accessing benefits was not common across the board for workers. Many workers even demonstrated pride in not accessing benefits and being able to rely solely on their income.

## URBAN VS. SUBURBAN NAIL SALONS

While non-luxury, Vietnamese-owned nail salons in Boston and other cities offered lower prices than salons in suburban, upper-middle class neighborhoods, they experienced higher customer volume that increased competition between urban nail salons. Because commission-based workers maximized earnings through the volume of services performed, workers who earned less per service were more compelled to work quickly and competitively. Furthermore, nail salons have anecdotally tried to price each other out. Urban areas were more likely to practice this business model since clusters of nail salons exist in these areas. This competition created constant demand for lower prices while quality and labor of services remained the same.

Interviewed workers prioritized the location of nail salons based on transportation, perceived income, and need for flexibility. Interviewed workers who preferred suburban neighborhoods cited benefits such as higher earnings, convenience of parking and driving for child care obligations, and decreased competition. However, some workers preferred working in the city because of access to public transportation, proximity to home, and ability to attend to personal errands when business is slow. Some interviewed workers cited that working in a major city tends to make less money since services are priced lower and customers generally tip less.

## DETERMINING NAIL SALONS BASED ON VALUES

Hai has been a nail salon worker for over 10 years. Hai doesn't like the nail salon industry, but feels like he has no choice in his career. After he interviewed for other jobs at hospitals, companies, and airports, interviewers would never call him back.

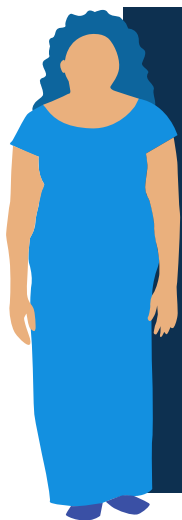
Hai feels that some workers aim to work in an environment with high earnings. But Hai chooses to work at nail salons that have business practices that align with his values. This means opening and closing salons exactly at the scheduled time and having an environment where staff get along, follow the agreed rules, and trust one another.



## EXPERIENCING HEALTH CONCERNS IN THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY

Lien came to the US as a refugee in the 1980s. Lien worked in small family businesses, including marketplaces, restaurants, and hardwood flooring. She took a break to raise her six children before becoming a nail salon worker.

Lien only worked in the industry for three years. She had good relationships with her owners and provided good services. However, working in the nail salon industry took a toll on Lien. Because of customers' constant demands for immediate service, Lien often skipped meals and breaks to perform as many nail services as possible. As a result, Lien experienced intense gastrointestinal pain and had to get surgery. After that, Lien permanently left the industry to care for her children.





## INADEQUATE PROTECTION FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

Although nail salon workers are continuously exposed to harmful fumes, ventilation that protects nail salon staff and customers is not standard across Massachusetts. Nail salon workers frequently handle toxic chemicals and breathe in air particulates from nail salon products, including acetone, alcohol, thinners and polishes.<sup>13,14</sup> In Boston, the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHEC) required nail salons to install table-side ventilation systems by 2018<sup>15</sup> and launched the Safe Nail Salons Project to provide free training and technical assistance for Boston nail salons that want to improve air quality.<sup>16</sup> Some Boston salons also received competitive grant funding from BPHEC to support compliance with new regulations on mandatory ventilation.<sup>17</sup> But salons outside of Boston usually do not have proper ventilation in the salon. Even when salons have vents, these systems may not introduce fresh air into the nail salon environment<sup>18</sup> and may not be in consistent use.<sup>18</sup> Ventilation systems are also cost prohibitive for small businesses with limited capital.

In addition to a lack of physical infrastructure to protect workers, it was not standard practice to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the nail salon workplace prior to the pandemic. Interviewed workers decided to wear a mask to cover strong chemical odors and reduce air particulates from entering their bodies. Other workers chose not to wear masks because of their discomfort, limited use, and fear of negative feedback from customers. Even when workers wore masks in the nail salon, most workers used surgical masks, which are intended to protect against the spread of saliva and fluids, not chemical fumes or dust.<sup>19</sup> Nitrile gloves and goggles that protect workers against chemical splashes are also not standard in the nail salon environment. Local, state, and federal government agencies do not heavily regulate the use of PPE in nail salons despite recognition of the industry hazards. Some salons provided all basic PPE to their workers, while other salons provided only some necessary equipment, thereby shifting the cost of protection to workers.

Interviewees reported many health challenges related to workplace conditions. Symptoms included asthma, fatigue, joint pain, numbness in arms, eczema, nose bleeds, and allergies. Workers also reported digestive issues because they skipped meals or ate too quickly during the work day to keep up with customer demands for service. Research findings suggest that nail salon workers' symptoms can be a direct result of occupational health hazards.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup> In addition, research suggests that nail salon workers report significantly greater levels of physical aches and musculoskeletal pain than office workers.<sup>24</sup>

## COMMUNITY CARE IN THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY

The nail salon is a space where workers, owners, and customers can provide care for one another. Nail salon workers rely on nail salons and owners in order to sustain themselves, while owners rely on workers to sustain the business. Nail salon workers' and owners' experiences are thus intertwined in the industry. At the same time, the industry depends entirely on customers entering the salon and receiving services. Customers often receive nail services to make themselves feel pampered and cared for. During the service, nail salon workers provide personal care to customers beyond the nail service. Nail salon workers often have conversations with customers about their personal lives. They provide advice, emotional support, and affirmations through these conversations. Yet this emotional labor is not often accounted for in mainstream narratives of the nail salon industry.

# INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT INSTABILITY

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Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most nail salon workers identified as low-wage Asian immigrant women workers yet lacked access to common workers' benefits. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of the existing nail salon industry and its employment structure.

## CHALLENGES WITH ACCESSING BENEFITS AND RELIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an exceptional scenario that allowed many nail salon workers to access unemployment benefits for the first time. When businesses shut down, interviewed workers were initially hesitant to apply for unemployment benefits due to fear of fracturing the employer/employee relationship. But because of the long-term closure of salons, many nail salon owners actively encouraged their workers to apply for unemployment benefits.

**Among 51 COVID-19 worker survey participants, 88% applied for unemployment benefits.**

Most surveyed workers cited reliance on unemployment benefits, as opposed to paychecks or employee benefits, such as paid family leave or hazard pay. This reliance contributed to a deluge of nail salon workers coming to VietAID and AOU during the onset of the pandemic.

While nail salon employees were generally able to apply for regular unemployment insurance when businesses shut down in March, workers misclassified as independent contractors had to wait until the Pandemic Unemployment Assurance (PUA) program was implemented at the end of April 2020. Misclassified workers therefore could not immediately access crucial benefits.

Nail salon owners also faced financial uncertainty during the Massachusetts shutdown due to lack of support for immigrant-owned small businesses during the pandemic. Many pandemic relief efforts targeted small businesses, including the Payment Protection Program (PPP), Economic Injury Disaster Loans, Small Business Administration Loans, and city- and state-wide grants. But the Boston Globe reported that more than 50% of the money that Massachusetts companies received for PPP went to fewer than 5% of loan recipients.<sup>25</sup> Most of these funds were inaccessible to nail salon owners for a variety of reasons, including language barriers, technology barriers, and lack of information to assess eligibility. **Although all 15 surveyed nail salon owners applied for some form of relief, only half actually received any small business relief.**

Owners were unable to generate any income due to the shut down since revenue depended on in-person services. Without business relief, owners could not sustain their businesses and support their workers. And without salons operating, nail salon workers were unable to support their own families and communities.





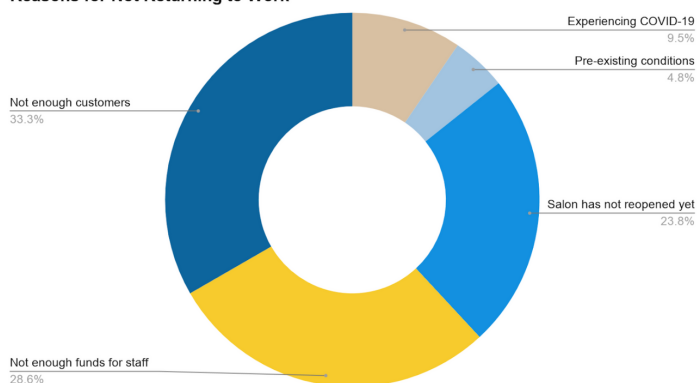
## EXPERIENCES WITH REOPENING NAIL SALONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts deemed nail salons as higher risk and delayed the reopening process during the pandemic. Although hair salons and nail salons require similar levels of personal care and close contact, hair salons reopened in Phase 1 at the end of May 2020, while nail salons could not reopen until Phase 2 Step 2 at the end of June 2020. Delayed reopening significantly impacted workers' potential for higher earnings during the summer, their busiest season of the year.

Many workers had to choose between staying home or returning to the workforce. Most interviewed workers said that they were not making ends meet through nail salon work, but unemployment benefits and other forms of assistance were not enough to support their entire households.

Many interviewed workers cited health concerns as their top reason for not returning to work. The lack of demand for nail salon services and potential decrease in earnings made working not worth the safety risk. This was especially true for workers with pre-existing conditions, young children, and elder loved ones. Age particularly served as a significant factor for assessing vulnerability to COVID-19. Even when older workers did not express significant pre-existing conditions, they were wary of putting themselves at risk due to the impact of COVID-19 on older populations.

Reasons for Not Returning to Work



The prevailing sentiment from interviewed workers was that they had no other options to earn enough money during this time period. Although workers feared for their health and safety, they had to work to meet basic living costs. Workers who had fewer support systems felt even more inclined to return to work. Undocumented workers, who were ineligible for unemployment compensation and government benefits to subsidize loss of income, were especially impacted and relied on community support or mutual aid.

**“ESPECIALLY FOR WORKERS WHO DO NOT HAVE SUPPORT, THEY HAVE TO DO SO MUCH MORE. IF YOU DON’T LIVE WITH A HUSBAND, LIKE ME, OR IF YOU DON’T HAVE FAMILIAL SUPPORT, IT WILL BE VERY DIFFICULT TO KEEP UP WITH COSTS.”**

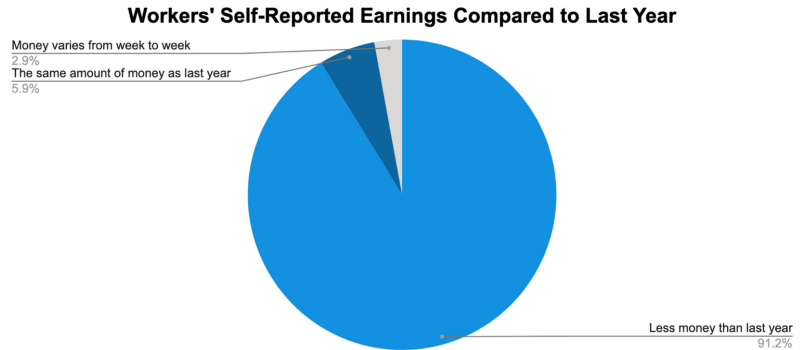
**“IF SALONS REOPENED, I WOULDN’T NEED ANY ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS TO RETURN TO WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC. EVEN IF I AM WORRIED FOR MY SAFETY AND WORRIED ABOUT GOING THROUGH CHEMOTHERAPY... I HAVE TO WORK WHENEVER I AM GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO.”**

**“YOU CAN ONLY TRY YOUR BEST TO BE HYGIENIC AND WASH YOUR HANDS AND FEET FREQUENTLY. I HAVE TWO CHILDREN SO I NEED TO WORK. WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT BEING SCARED OF THE VIRUS?”**

But even after returning to work, nail salon workers still struggled to make ends meet. Prior to the pandemic, it was not unusual for workers to sit idle for hours while waiting for customers to come in during slow seasons. For workers who have returned to the salon, COVID-19 has made workers sit idle for much longer periods of time with few, if any, customers. **Over 90% of workers reported earning less money this year than last year.**

As a result of the delayed reopening, nail salons experienced a much shorter busy season with a smaller volume of customers, while also facing a shortage in relief options. Some interviewed workers said that stimulus payments and unemployment benefits provided more stability during the shutdown period. Although there was an initial

rush of clientele in the first few weeks, the amount of customers served was lower than previous years due to social distancing guidelines. The volume of clientele eventually dwindled in August 2020. The decrease in clientele corresponded to the nail salon industry's usual slow season, which typically begins when summer ends. This slowdown also corresponded with the end of the initial boost in unemployment benefits payments from the CARES Act. After these benefits were significantly reduced, workers struggled to cover their living costs. Nail salon workers thus experienced a significantly lower amount of clientele during their slow season, without the benefits of summer earnings or significant COVID relief to serve as a buffer.



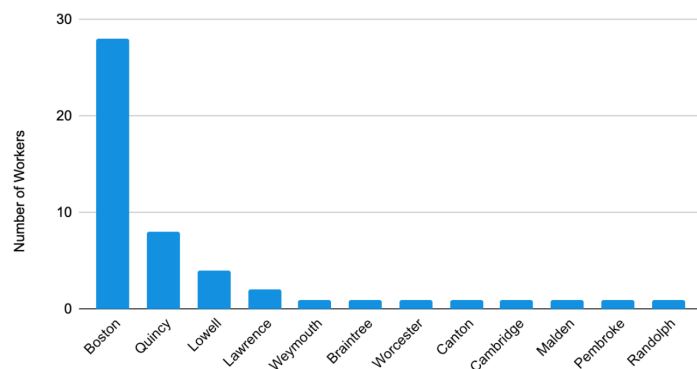
Due to decreased consumer demand, nail salon workers were unable to fully rely on their earnings, despite salon efforts to boost workers' income. For nail salon workers who depended on commission, the amount of income they made directly depended on consumer volume. During a global pandemic, many customers were wary of receiving close contact services on a frequent basis. Customers that did receive services often opted for more basic nail services that often cost as little as \$10. Many owners tried to respond to the slowdown in business by raising the costs of services by a few dollars, but the increase in services was not enough to accommodate for the drastic loss in clientele. Furthermore, customers questioned or refused to pay increased costs of services despite the new costs to implement extra health and safety measures in the workplace.

**"I DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT TO SAY IN TERMS OF PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO NAIL SALON WORKERS. WE NEED TO DO OUR BEST TO PREVENT FURTHER SPREAD OF COVID TO GET OUR CUSTOMERS BACK. WITHOUT CUSTOMERS, OTHER ASSISTANCE SEEMS FUTILE AND TEMPORARY AT BEST."**

**"IN THE FUTURE, AS THE PANDEMIC CONTINUES, THE MAIN SOURCE OF SUPPORT FOR NAIL SUPPORT WORKERS WILL BE CUSTOMER RETENTION. CUSTOMERS NEED TO GET THEIR NAIL SERVICES. NO ONE, NOT EVEN A GOVERNMENT AGENCY, CAN SUPPORT ALL THE NAIL SALON WORKERS TO A COMFORTABLE POSITION IF THEY DO NOT HAVE WORK."**

**COVID-19 has emphasized the flaws in the commission structure of this seasonal industry.** Workers could not survive off of the income they made given the low costs of services provided. Workers who returned to work needed additional financial assistance yet may not be eligible for government support.

**Cities Where Worker Survey Respondents Live**



While facing decreased earnings, nail salon workers had to simultaneously contend with rising rental costs and the risk of displacement. Vietnamese nail salon workers in Massachusetts commonly live in areas like Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Quincy, Randolph, and Lowell. **54% of worker survey respondents resided in Boston alone.** Like other urban areas throughout the state and the country, these communities are facing

gentrification. Although workers cited housing costs as their primary concern among living costs, they were underserved through housing relief efforts. Many interviewed workers lived in private or shared housing at market rent and cited fears of not being able to pay rent moving forward.

“US WORKERS WILL DEFINITELY NEED ASSISTANCE IN THE WINTER, ESPECIALLY IN THE FORM OF CASH AND MONETARY ASSISTANCE. IN THE WINTER, THEY WILL NOT MAKE ENOUGH MONEY. WHAT’S MOST WORRYING ARE THE MONTHLY COSTS OF LIVING.”

“IF I HAVE UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS, I AM NOT WORRIED. IF THIS PANDEMIC CONTINUES ON, THEN I AM NOT SURE. AS LONG AS I CAN CONTINUE GETTING UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS WHILE WORKING PART-TIME, THAT’S ALL I CAN ASK FOR NOW. I DON’T THINK I CAN GO TO WORK FULL TIME IN AN ECONOMY LIKE THIS.”

## LIVING AT THE INTERSECTION OF GENTRIFICATION AND IMMIGRATION

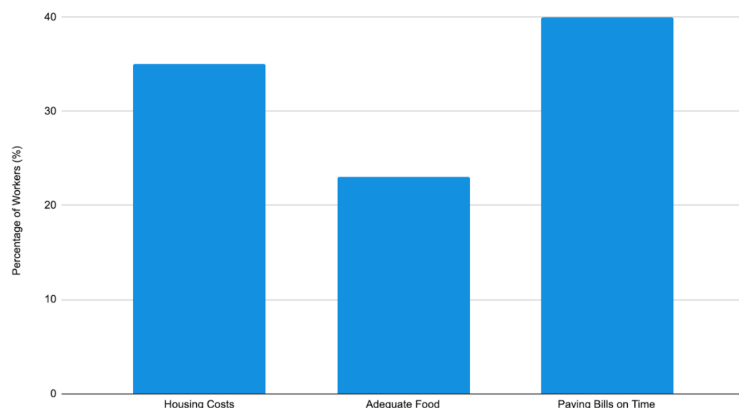
Kim Lan has worked in the nail salon industry for over 10 years. She likes doing nails because she sees herself as an artist. But Kim Lan has thought about leaving the industry multiple times. Because her undocumented husband has been unable to find stable employment, her earnings support the entire family. Kim Lan works as a part-time nail salon worker on an hourly wage basis and receives partial unemployment benefits. But these earnings are not enough to support her entire family.

Kim Lan lives in Dorchester with her husband and children. Kim Lan likes Dorchester because the closest Vietnamese grocery stores are only a 5-minute walk away. But like many other residents, Kim Lan feels the heavy impact of gentrification on the neighborhood. Kim Lan pays \$1,400/mo in rent for a two-bedroom and owes \$700 in back rent from a previous apartment, which she cannot pay because of the loss of income during COVID-19. Although Kim Lan receives benefits, they only put food on the table, and fail to support her role in the household as the primary income earner while living in a neighborhood that increasingly gets more expensive.



Interviewees who returned to work said that they were barely over the threshold that disqualified them for unemployment benefits. Nail salon workers continued to rely on support for basic needs despite receiving some benefits and short term relief. **Even though all worker survey participants who applied for unemployment benefits received these benefits, 40%**

Worker Survey Participants Struggled to Cover...



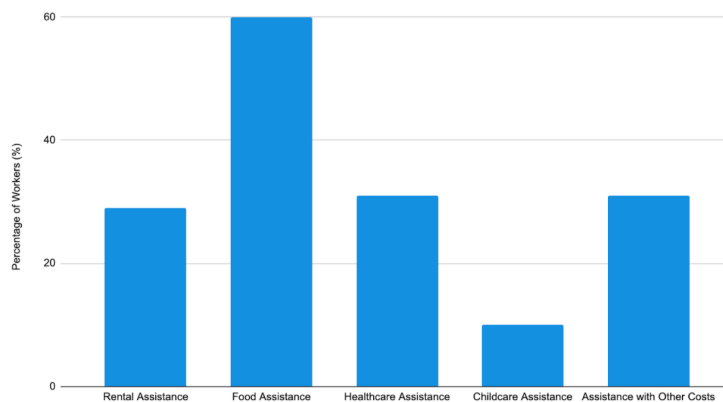
**said that assistance was not enough to cover living costs.** Many workers were forced to cover living costs by going into their savings, receiving support from families and friends, and depending on another household member's income. Fewer benefits were available for workers who have returned to work. **Among 28 workers who returned to work, only 50% of workers were receiving partial unemployment benefits.**

"I GET \$150/WEEK AND MY HUSBAND GETS \$250/WEEK IN UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS. BUT OUR RENT IS \$1600/MONTH. MY HUSBAND IS AN ELECTRICIAN, SO OUR LANDLORD LETS HIM FIX UP HIS OTHER PROPERTIES TO REDUCE RENT."

"NAIL SALON WORKERS NEED FOOD ASSISTANCE DURING THIS TIME, AS WELL AS RENTAL ASSISTANCE AND MONETARY ASSISTANCE. HOWEVER, I DON'T REALLY KNOW IF I CAN SPEAK TO OTHERS' NEEDS. ESPECIALLY NOW, ALL NAIL SALONS HAVE A DRAMATIC SLOWDOWN IN BUSINESS. IT'S HARD TO STATE WHAT COULD BRING UP BUSINESS IN THOSE SALONS."

Many Vietnamese community members depended on informal care systems, such as family members, neighbors, and babysitters, for support and childcare when they were working. These forms of care became much harder to depend due to the enforcement of social distancing. Workers felt the competing pressures of staying home to support school-age children who were learning remotely and working for potential earnings in order to put food on the table. Most workers did not know what a childcare voucher was and had never considered benefits like Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), a cash assistance program that would make parents eligible to receive childcare vouchers.

Types of Assistance that COVID-19 Surveyed Workers Sought





## SURVIVING WITHOUT SUPPORT NETWORKS

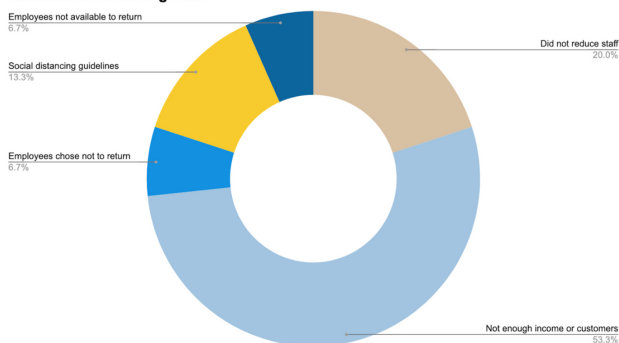
Lilia came to the US in 2019 with her two children to join her husband. However, Lilia's husband passed away a few months later. Lilia now takes care of her two children without the support of any relatives or friends. During COVID-19, she made just enough to pay rent. With the support of VietAID, Lilia was able to receive RAFT benefits to support her family.

Lilia was an elementary school teacher in Vietnam. Teaching was Lilia's passion. However, because she does not have the flexibility to explore careers without a support system in place, she doesn't think she can pursue her passion.

Nail salon owners also struggled to access crucial benefits and sustain their salon on revenue, which directly hurt both workers and owners.

**Nearly 90% of small Asian American businesses lost revenue last year, a rate higher than businesses of other racial and ethnic groups.**<sup>26</sup> Lack of support for small businesses trickled down to the workforce. **70% of surveyed owners were forced to reduce staffing due to COVID-19.** Worker interviewees mentioned that they may work fewer hours because of childcare obligations, lack of business, and adherence to social distancing guidelines.

Reasons for Reducing Staff

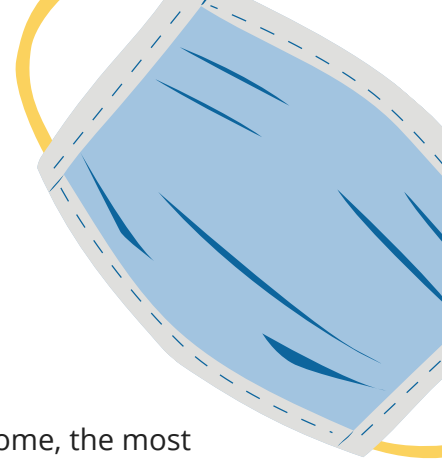


**"I WAS SCHEDULED TO COME IN TODAY, BUT NO CUSTOMERS MADE APPOINTMENTS, SO THE OWNER CLOSED THE ENTIRE SALON. THERE'S NO SUPPORT FOR DAYS WHEN THE SALON CLOSSES."**

## WHAT WORKERS WANT YOU TO KNOW

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing flaws of seasonal, commission-based industries like the nail salon industry, which relies heavily on in-person contact.
- Workers who have returned to work are worried about covering their living costs moving forward, but they are generally not paid sick time, overtime, paid family leave, or hazard pay.
- At the same time, nail salon workers and owners are both struggling to make ends meet as a result of the decline in consumer demand. Even when owners make active efforts to recruit clientele and boost revenue, customers continue to worry about the safety of nail services during the pandemic.
- Nail salon workers and owners are worried about missing out on crucial high earnings during their busy seasons. Because of the ongoing pandemic, many special occasions, such as proms and vacations, have been canceled. Workers who are paid on hourly wages fear layoffs and reduced hours as a result of slow business. Commission-based workers heavily rely on consumer demand for nail services. If few customers come in, then both workers and owners suffer.

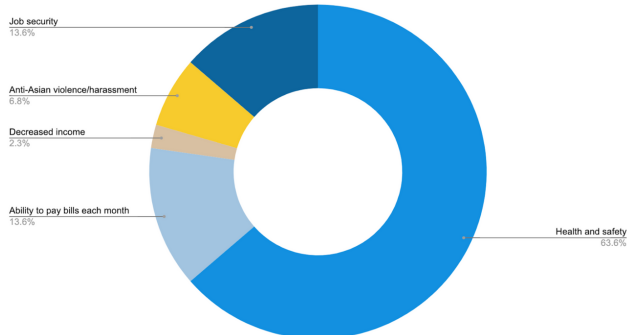
# HEALTH & SAFETY CONCERNS



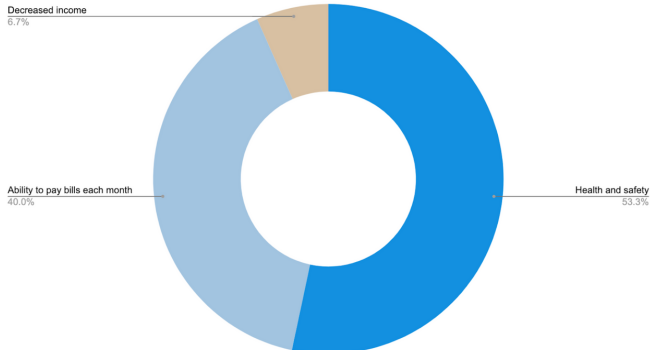
## FEAR OF COVID-19 DURING THE MASSACHUSETTS SHUTDOWN

Even though many nail salon owners and workers were afraid of loss of income, the most prevailing fear was for their health and safety. **Of the 52 nail salon workers and 15 owners surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic, both workers and owners' main concern was the health and safety of their family and friends.**

Workers' Main Concern During COVID-19



Owners' Main Concern During COVID-19



## HEALTH & SAFETY UPON REOPENING NAIL SALONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

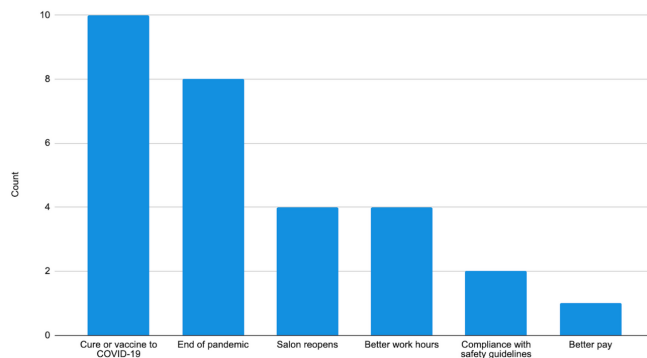
### DECIDING WHETHER TO RETURN TO WORK

Upon reopening, some workers and owners expressed hesitation about working in the salon due to personal health risks. Many older workers and workers with pre-existing conditions decided that they would not return to work until they had the vaccine or until COVID-19 was no longer a concern. Some workers who had young children at home also did not return to work, as doing so would put their children at risk of exposure to COVID-19. Lastly, some workers said that they would have returned but were unable to as a result of nail salon restrictions during the pandemic, such as compliance with social distancing guidelines.

"MY DOCTOR HAS TOLD ME I SHOULDN'T RETURN TO WORK AT THIS TIME IN CASE OF EXPOSURE. MY EMPLOYER HAS BEEN UNDERSTANDING BECAUSE OF MY HEALTH. I WILL RETURN TO WORK DEPENDING ON THE VACCINE."

"ALTHOUGH I FEEL LIKE IT'S GENERALLY SAFE TO RETURN TO WORK AT MY SALON, I WANT TO PLAY IT EXTRA SAFE DURING THIS TIME TO MAKE SURE I STAY SAFE, ESPECIALLY SINCE I HAVE AN ELDERLY MOM AT HOME."

Necessary Conditions for Return to Work (N = 17)



## AN OLDER WORKER'S CONCERNS ABOUT COVID-19

Trinh first came to the US from Vietnam more than 40 years ago. She first settled in Brockton and then Dorchester. She has been working in the salon industry for more than 20 years. She was drawn to the ease of entering the profession. She was previously an owner of a salon before selling the salon to go into retirement.

In the last two years, Trinh has been a worker paid in cash since she is receiving retirement benefits. She continued to work despite retiring because she did not want to stay home. Working in a nail salon would provide extra income to supplement her benefits and help her daughter pay off her mortgage.

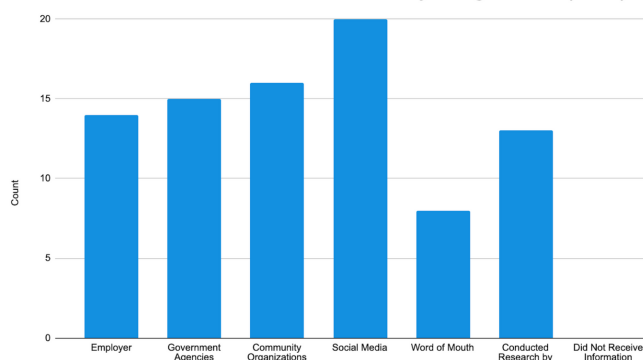
However, Trinh has not returned to the nail salon since reopening due to COVID-19. Her children are worried because of her age and potential exposure to COVID-19. As an elder, Trinh is unsure whether she can continue in the nail salon industry moving forward. With the stability of her retirement benefits, Trinh can prioritize her health without having to worry about living costs.



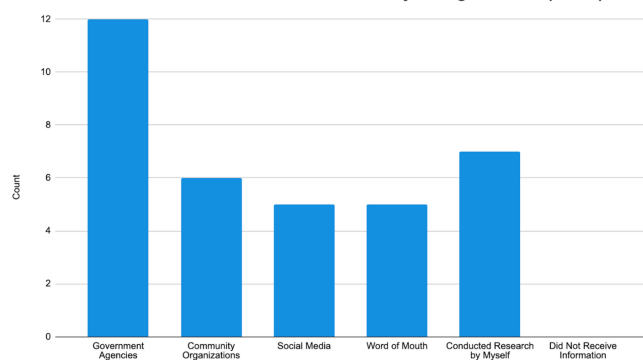
## COVID-19 SAFETY MEASURES WITHIN THE NAIL SALON

Because of the widespread dissemination of health and safety information leading up to reopening, nail salon workers and owners knew how to protect themselves when salons resumed business. However, the source of this information varied. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts released guidelines for salon reopening.<sup>27</sup> But while owners heavily depended on information released by government agencies, most nail salon workers received information on health and safety protocols from social media.

Workers' Source of Information on How to Work Safely During COVID-19 (N = 34)



Owners' Source of Information on How to Work Safely During COVID-19 (N = 15)



Nail salons were generally quick to adopt the COVID-19 safety protocols in order to minimize exposure to COVID-19. A typical nail salon setup during COVID-19 consisted of the following:

- every other pedicure chair and manicure table in use;
- plexiglass barriers between chairs and tables where staff and customers interact;
- use of ventilation or opening windows and doors for fresh air; and
- customers required to wait in their cars or outside prior to service.



All individuals were generally required to wear masks in the salon, wash their hands frequently, and maintain a distance of 6 feet. Staff generally wore gloves, face shields, and gowns or outer layers to protect themselves. These requirements ensured that receiving nail salon services during the pandemic was as safe as possible.

**“DURING THE PANDEMIC, WORKERS HAVE TO CHECK THEIR TEMPERATURE USING THE TOUCHLESS THERMOMETER EACH DAY. IF YOU HAVE EVEN A SLIGHT SYMPTOMS OF COVID, YOU HAVE TO GO HOME PER THE OWNER’S INSTRUCTIONS. THIS IS HOW THEY TAKE CARE OF THE NAIL SALON AS A WHOLE.”**

**“NAIL SALON OWNERS HAD TO GO THROUGH A COURSE TO LEARN HOW TO TAKE CARE AND LOOK OVER THE HEALTH OF WORKERS AND CUSTOMERS DURING THE PANDEMIC.”**

Although some of these protections existed within nail salons prior to the pandemic, the pandemic standardized protocols across nail salons to protect nail salon staff. Personal protective equipment, such as masks, gloves, and face shields, ensured that nail salon staff were protected from COVID-19. Although which party was responsible for providing PPE to workers still depended on the salon, the pandemic made PPE a common feature in all salons. Implementing more consistent use of PPE also helped protect workers against chemical fumes and dust particles, but whether these standards will last beyond the pandemic is unclear.

Although various funding sources helped businesses meet COVID-19 protocols throughout reopening, these funds were short-term solutions to a long-term demand for expensive personal protective equipment. These one-time funds often financially supported business owners to provide equipment to all staff, but costs for equipment are ongoing. In addition, prices for personal protective equipment increased dramatically during the pandemic due to high demand. Although grassroots initiatives in states like California helped to distribute personal protective equipment directly to nail salon workers, public initiatives have not directly targeted workers in Massachusetts.

Some nail salons found unique ways to cope with the pandemic without increased funding or government support to cover shifts in infrastructure. But owners bore the brunt of costs to adjust their nail salons to new regulations, keep staff safe, and innovate, all while dealing with a slowdown in business. Future efforts should offer nail salons flexibility to operate creatively in respect to the pandemic, like allowing manicurists to offer mobile services and creating outdoor spaces for nail salons to operate.

## **CHALLENGES TO RECEIVING BENEFITS DURING COVID-19 INFECTION**

Although unemployment benefits supported nail salon workers when they had to quarantine, barriers may delay crucial benefits for nail salon workers. When someone who tested positive for COVID-19 came into contact with a nail salon, staff in that nail salon had to stop working for a period of time to follow quarantine guidelines. During their quarantine, nail salon staff may claim unemployment benefits. But as a result of language barriers, many may claim their quarantine as a leave of absence, which caused their benefits to be put on hold until the issue was resolved. This delay often lasted for weeks or months.



At the same time, most nail salon workers were not eligible to receive workers' benefits from their employer. Although some stores provided benefits like paid sick time, hazard pay, and paid family medical leave, most traditional commission-based salons did not. Workers often assumed that working in the nail salon industry precluded a worker from receiving these benefits. And because nail salons generally did not provide medical insurance, workers had to find their own health coverage.

## LACK OF PRIORITIZATION FOR VACCINATIONS

Although many nail salon workers and owners were immediately prepared to get the vaccine, language barriers, immigration status, and lack of state prioritization precluded workers from getting the vaccine. Massachusetts began distributing COVID-19 vaccines in December 2020. Yet beauty workers were not designated as a priority group in the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in Massachusetts and other states. In New York, advocates and workers' groups pushed for the state's government to prioritize nail salon workers, in addition to barbers and other beauty workers, for COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, due to language barriers, workers may not have understood how to sign up for vaccinations once they were eligible.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, workers must present ID when getting vaccinations, which can be especially difficult for workers without immigration status.<sup>30</sup>

### WHAT WORKERS WANT YOU TO KNOW

- Nail salons must juggle the need to increase business while simultaneously maintaining social distancing and balancing workers' shifts.
- Owners and workers continue to bear the brunt of adapting to health and safety guidelines as costs of equipment rise and loss of income expands. Nail salon staff still worry about exposure to COVID-19.
- Working in a close contact service means that workers and owners are at greater exposure to COVID-19, but there is generally no infrastructure within nail salons to support staff when they are sick.
- Although workers have generally expressed that they will get the vaccine to keep themselves safe, there is still the worry that customers will not be vaccinated.



# ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE IN NAIL SALONS

Before the pandemic, nail salon workers faced racism and violence from customers because of the devaluing of low-wage immigrant Asian women labor. Nail technicians have been historically painted as suspicious, working-class gossipers.<sup>1</sup> The influx of new Asian immigrant women into the nail salon workforce made the general public associate nail salons with sweatshops, uncleanliness, and cheap services.<sup>4</sup> Modern depictions of the nail salon mock and distrust manicurists for their lack of English proficiency.<sup>4</sup> Negative portrayals of nail salons make the labor of immigrant Asian women seem inferior to services provided at salons with non-immigrant manicurists. Thus, Asians and Asian Americans have faced anti-Asian violence and racism long before COVID-19.

## RISE IN ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

During the COVID-19 shutdown of businesses, nail salons received biased media attention that discouraged people from entering nail salons. While coverage on other personal care services, focused on small business struggles, nail salons had to face damaging stories relating to COVID-19 safety. For example, Governor Gavin Newsom of California stated that the state's COVID-19 spread started at a nail salon, a statement which he later revoked in private.<sup>31,32</sup>

Governor Newsom's remark exacerbated national anti-Asian racism surrounding COVID-19 without evidence for his claims.

The pandemic led to an increase in racist and xenophobic language towards Asians and Asian Americans. Racist names for COVID-19, including "Kung Flu" and "China Virus," shifted the blame for the spread of COVID-19 from lack of institutional prevention to

Asian and Asian American individuals. As a result, anti-Asian violence surged during the pandemic. This included the devastating murder of eight people, six of whom were Asian American women, in massage parlors across the Atlanta area in March 2021,<sup>33,34</sup> along with numerous accounts of physical and verbal violence against Asian American people in the U.S.<sup>35</sup>

In an industry that predominantly consists of Asian immigrant women and femmes working in close contact services, many nail salon workers and owners continued to face explicit and implicit racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Common forms of anti-Asian violence within the nail salon space both before and during the pandemic included verbal insults of nail salon workers' accents, refusing to pay or tip workers after receiving services, spitting on workers, and yelling. Although nail salon workers feared anti-Asian violence, many felt like they had no choice but to go to work in order to cover their bills, pay for housing, and put food on the table.

"LIKE ALL HUMANS, WORKERS MAKE MISTAKES. THERE'S NO NEED TO TREAT THEM SO BADLY."

"IN MARCH 2021, I HEARD ABOUT THE RISE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST ASIANS, LIKE THE VIOLENCE THAT OCCURRED IN ATLANTA. I'M VERY WORRIED AND AFRAID. AS SOMEONE WHO IS UNDOCUMENTED, IT IS ALREADY VERY HARD TO FIND WORK AND SUPPORT. ON TOP OF THIS, I HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE AND RACISM."

"I'VE BEEN STAYING AT WORK LATE TO EARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, BUT THAT MEANS I HAVE TO TAKE THE TRAIN HOME LATER THAN USUAL. I FEAR BEING ALONE SO MUCH THAT I WILL JUMP BETWEEN TRAIN CARS UNTIL I FIND ONE THAT ISN'T EMPTY."

Although some individuals turned to the police to address the rise in anti-Asian violence, nail salon staff were wary of law enforcement and may instead turn to community alternatives for protection. New York City began an initiative of employing undercover police officers in areas with reported hate crimes.<sup>36</sup> Multiple states, including Massachusetts, called for updated hate crime laws to address the recent attacks against Asian American communities.<sup>37</sup> But many vulnerable nail salon workers feared and were harmed from interactions with government agencies. For workers without work authorization, including undocumented workers, interactions with the criminal legal system and other government agencies could lead to their deportation. Many Southeast Asians are in deportation proceedings precisely because of their interactions with law enforcement.<sup>38</sup> And the criminal legal system, including hate crimes prosecutions, disproportionately targets Black, Indigenous, and people of Color, many of whom are beloved nail salon customers who support the industry. For the nail salon industry and communities of Color more broadly, solutions to racism and xenophobia must encompass non-law enforcement alternatives to ensure safety.

## JUGGLING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STAFF AND CUSTOMERS

Mai is a full-time college student and a part-time nail salon worker. Mai's main concern about the industry is with customers. Customers will nitpick. Sometimes it is fine because they're just trying to have a good time, but other times the level of disrespect is too much. The owner usually just accepts the complaints and apologizes instead of pushing back because of language barriers, and Mai will often have to interpret. But if the situation escalates within the salon, both Mai and the owner know that they have to de-escalate by themselves, even if it means returning money for full services. They will not call the police because the police are not capable of handling the situation calmly.

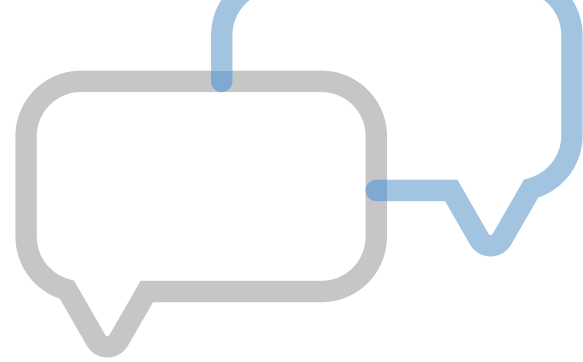
In the future, Mai hopes that customers treat nail salon workers better. Customers think it's an easy job because nail salon workers socialize in their off time, but the work is physically painful. Nail salon workers go above and beyond because they're getting paid to do so. Customers should be transparent with workers about their expectations. If they don't like their service, nail salon workers will be more than happy to fix their nails.



## WHAT WORKERS WANT YOU TO KNOW

- Because the nail salon industry is dominated by Asian immigrant women, the industry faces the brunt of rising anti-Asian violence. Yet workers and owners are not well-equipped or supported in dealing with the onslaught of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia.
- Nail salon workers are hesitant to rely on protection through law enforcement that may put vulnerable workers at risk of facing immigration consequences.
- Future efforts need to address the root causes that make workers vulnerable to racial harassment and violence, as well as provide community alternatives that make communities feel safe and protected without strict enforcement.

# LANGUAGE BARRIERS



## CHALLENGES WITH ACCESSING BENEFITS

Since the COVID-19 shutdown, VietAID and AOU witnessed an increase in nail salon workers applying for benefits. Workers received a variety of benefits, including unemployment benefits, rental assistance, SNAP, and Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) cards for workers with school-aged children. The shutdown and slowdown of businesses, as well as the exceptional nature of living in a global pandemic, forced workers to supplement their low incomes through government sources. Furthermore, social media and Vietnamese media sources provided heavy outreach on the various benefit programs. As a result, the Vietnamese community was more aware of the availability of these programs as resources for nail salon workers during the pandemic.

Despite awareness of these benefit programs, many nail salon workers faced barriers to accessing resources like unemployment insurance due to limited English proficiency. Common barriers included:

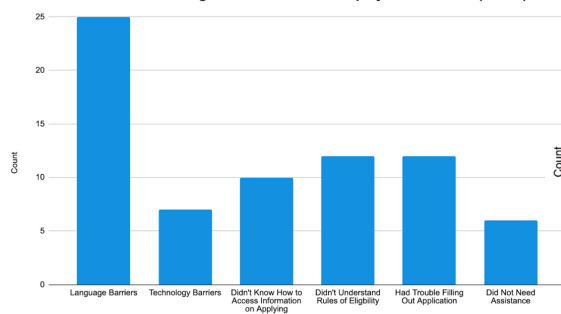
- online application portals were initially only in English;
- websites used Google Translate, which could be inaccurate;
- the first point of contact when community members call into a government agency was often in English, which created confusion and challenges in asking for an interpreter and disincentivized calling in the first place; and
- translated notices were not written in plain language.

Furthermore, capacity at government agencies was limited. When workers had questions about benefits, phone lines at the government agencies had long hold times and issues took weeks or even months to resolve.

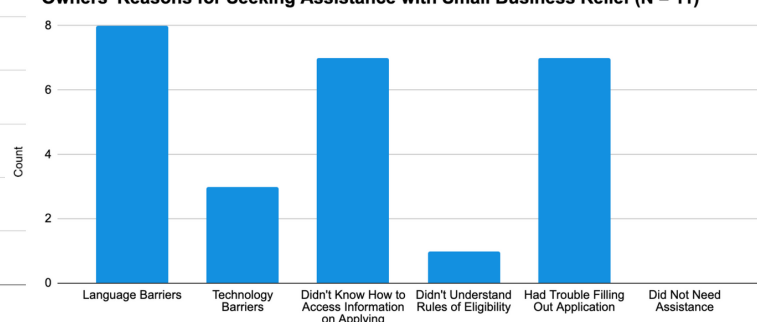
## ROLE OF INFORMAL NETWORKS AND NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Due to language barriers and the inaccessibility of government agencies, community members must rely on sources outside of these agencies to get the benefits that they need.

Workers' Reasons for Seeking Assistance with Unemployment Benefits (N = 44)



Owners' Reasons for Seeking Assistance with Small Business Relief (N = 11)



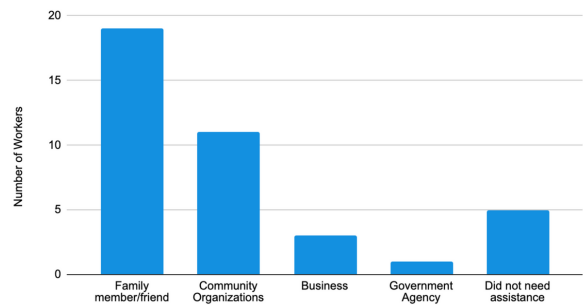
Throughout the pandemic, community organizations served on the front lines and facilitated communication between Vietnamese community members and government agencies so that community members could receive benefits. These advocates translated notices, assisted with applications, and spent extensive time advocating with government agencies to resolve issues. VietAID also served as a subcontractor with MetroHousing to provide rental assistance to low-income tenants. Through this model, MetroHousing financially supported VietAID in providing housing relief to Vietnamese community members, while VietAID added capacity to MetroHousing's work through bilingual staffing and advocacy.

Many Vietnamese nail salon workers initially relied on the support of strong informal networks, including family, friends, and volunteers on social media, for assistance with unemployment benefits. Although many nail salon workers and owners received initial information and assistance with applications through these networks, when an issue occurred, community members often went to community organizations and advocates for triage. This process delayed access to relief and made community members vulnerable to missing important response deadlines.

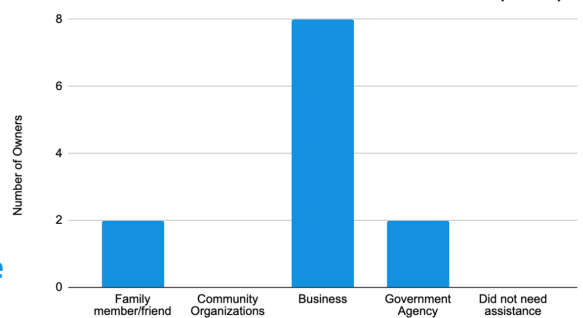
Nail salon owners often relied on assistance from for-profit businesses instead of community-based or non-profit organizations. **During the pandemic, all surveyed nail salon owners needed assistance with business loans to some degree,**

**with the most common source of assistance coming from a for-profit business.** These for-profit businesses, including multi-service agencies, law offices, and tax services, had bilingual staff that charged fees for submitting applications for loans, grants, and other forms of relief, whether or not the application was ultimately successful.

**Workers' Source of Assistance for Unemployment Benefits (N = 44)**



**Owners' Source of Assistance for Small Business Relief (N = 11)**



## AN UNDOCUMENTED SINGLE MOTHER FINDS SUPPORT

Nina is an undocumented nail salon worker with two children. Nina came to the US in hopes of getting a good education for her children. To support her family, she self-studied the nail profession. Because of Nina's immigration status, Nina knows that owners treat her differently. But nail salons were the easiest jobs to find without work authorization.

Throughout the pandemic, Nina did not receive unemployment benefits or stimulus checks because of her immigration status. As the only income earner in her household, she worried about keeping a roof over her family's head. Through VietAID, Nina received food and financial assistance.

Moving forward, Nina worries about finding a stable, long-term job. Even though she is worried about rising anti-Asian violence, the first thing she must figure out is how to provide for her children. In the future, she wants to find work in a collaborative work environment and figure out how to obtain immigration status.



## GAP IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Due to lack of infrastructure to support limited English proficient speakers with workforce development, Vietnamese people enter and choose to stay in the industry as a result of language access. Nail salon workers formerly had different occupations prior to immigrating to the U.S., ranging from seamstresses to office workers. However, without English proficiency, entrance into these industries was too difficult. Interviewed workers most frequently cited ease of entry and limited English proficiency as reasons for becoming a nail salon worker. However, the factors that may drive workers into the nail salon industry may be the same factors that prevent them from leaving. Especially for older workers and workers without work authorization, nail salon work becomes the only viable occupation. Even if workers want to switch careers, language, technology, and education levels limit workers to industries with predominantly Vietnamese community members. Furthermore, workforce development programs that help low-wage workers apply for more stable jobs are often taught in English or aimed at younger populations.

**“I DON’T WANT TO DO NAIL SALON WORK, BUT I DON’T REALLY KNOW WHERE TO GO. I DON’T REALLY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN ANY NEW SKILLS OR GO THROUGH MORE TRAINING.”**

**“IF I HAD THE CREDENTIALS, I WOULD GO BACK TO SCHOOL FOR SOMETHING THAT WOULD FIT MY PAST OCCUPATION IN VIETNAM AS A TEACHER. HOWEVER, I DON’T HAVE THE SUPPORT SYSTEM NEEDED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL RIGHT NOW, AND I DON’T THINK THAT I’LL EVER HAVE THE CHANCE TO PURSUE AN EDUCATION IN TEACHING AGAIN.”**

While some workers had no interest in continuing in the nail profession, other workers aspired to become nail salon owners in the future. However, some of these workers felt like they could not pursue ownership because of their limited language capacity. Others feared the risks of opening up a business, especially in a competitive field like the nail salon industry.

**“I WOULD BE INTERESTED IN OWNING A SALON WITH OTHER WORKERS. WHAT WORKER WOULDN’T WANT TO TRY THEIR HAND AT IT IF GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY? BUT MY CHILDREN NEED TO BE OLDER SO THAT I DON’T HAVE TO CARE FOR THEM AS MUCH AND I CAN FOCUS ON OTHER THINGS.”**

### AN ASPIRING OWNER DELAYS OPENING HER OWN SALON



After graduating college, Vy worked as an office worker in a management company in Vietnam. Her husband brought her to the U.S. and they settled in Massachusetts with her husband's 2 children. Vy became a nail salon worker because she did not know English. She likes the flexibility that nail salon work provides. In the morning, she can help the children get ready for school and go to work, then pick them up from school in the middle of the day without any issues.

Now, Vy is still working, but the salon is very empty. She can't get unemployment benefits because her current income of \$250/week is just above her weekly benefit amount. As a nail salon worker, Vy has thought about opening her own nail salon. But her limited English proficiency and low earnings are barriers. Vy is waiting until her children are older so that she can focus on her career. In the meantime, Vy hopes she can take more English classes and make enough money to pay the bills.



## ALTERNATIVE BUSINESS MODELS AS POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Although worker cooperatives (co-ops) can serve as a useful model for restructuring nail salons, immigrants with limited English proficiency have little access to institutional support to establish their own businesses. Worker co-ops are business models where workers collectively own and participate in the financial success of the business through their contribution of labor and decision-making power. Co-ops can reap the benefits of a commission-like system, where worker-owners keep 100% of profits from the business. Worker-owners also divide costs evenly, instead of individual owners holding the sole burden of costs. These qualities can address many issues that workers have identified in the industry. But because new nail salon owners often learn business practices from former owners or accountants that help set up the business, owners only receive help in sustaining the existing business model. Due to lack of information about and familiarity with alternative business models, nail salon owners are unable to explore these new models. Furthermore, organizations that provide information on alternative business models often do not have translated materials or bilingual staff to support limited English-speaking clients as they navigate the process of changing business structures.

There is a need for a separate entity that can fully engage with the nuanced needs of Vietnamese nail salon workers. Because business practices in Massachusetts nail salons vary, it is important to engage with nail salon workers on an individual level. VietAID operates as a community development corporation, while AOU is situated in a legal services agency. Few other organizations in Massachusetts target nail salon workers in a social services and community-building capacity. A Vietnamese workers' center can provide more capacity for building relationships with workers and supporting them in their professions. Having staff in the workers' center who can further build relationships in the nail salon community will ensure that the unique circumstances of each nail salon worker are accounted for.

### WHAT WORKERS WANT YOU TO KNOW

- As the pandemic continues, many people in the nail salon industry continue to rely on government assistance and relief programs to sustain their incomes. Yet government agencies are still inaccessible to community members.
- Even if government agencies improve language access within their systems, community advocates may continue to hold the burden of supporting workers and owners.
- Future efforts to support the Vietnamese community must go hand-in-hand with supporting the organizations that provide services to communities on the ground.
- Nail salon workers and limited English proficient speakers are left out of conversations of workforce development. Without information on other occupations, nail salon workers cannot find more suitable jobs.
- The challenges that the industry faces during the pandemic are a reflection of the deeper flaws in the business structure of most existing nail salons. Yet, without information on alternative business structures, nail salon owners feel bound to their current business model and depend on relief funding to sustain them into the future.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

- **Support policies that prioritize an equitable COVID-19 recovery plan for immigrant and BIPOC communities.** Immigrant communities, such as Vietnamese people in the nail salon industry, will need immense support in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Introduce policies that safeguard nail salon workers' health.** Standardizing PPE in nail salons and mandating owners to provide these supplies to workers will lift the burden on workers to protect themselves. Policies should also help nail salon owners provide PPE through long-term relief efforts to nail salons.
- **Collaborate with Asian American community organizations to address heightened anti-Asian violence and inequitable systems.** Asian and Asian American community members have nuanced understandings of anti-Asian violence and how best to address it. Asian American community organizations that work on the frontlines understand these nuances and can add valuable insight to policies.
- **Initiate small business leadership programs for immigrants with limited English proficiency.** Development of these programs will provide support for future nail salon owners and encourage them to advance skills in management, provide guidance on laws, and explore different business structures like worker cooperatives.
- **Support policies and initiatives that increase language access to government agencies and programs.** Increasing language access across all levels of governments will ensure that low-wage immigrant workers do not miss out on crucial benefits and programs.
- **Provide state and city funding to support salons installing proper ventilation systems to decrease exposure to chemicals.** Although Boston already requires proper ventilation systems, most of Massachusetts does not. Salons without long-term leases may run into issues with upfront capital for installation of these costly systems. By offering financial assistance to install these systems, nail salon owners will feel more inclined and have more financial freedom to invest in proper ventilation.
- **Create sector-specific small business grants and loans with fewer application barriers for minority-owned businesses in the personal care and service industry.** Funding for bilingual support and bicultural outreach for these relief efforts will facilitate access for small business owners and workers.

## FOR FUNDERS

- **Finance grassroots initiatives to protect undocumented workers.** These initiatives include providing relief for workers who do not have access to benefits, addressing food insecurity through mutual aid and local food distributions, and distributing PPE to workers.
- **Fund the development of worker-centered establishments, including a Vietnamese workers' center and immigrant-owned worker cooperatives.** A Vietnamese workers' center will build capacity to further assess the nuanced needs of the nail salon industry. A workers' center can potentially develop efforts like employer high road programs, anti-Asian harassment trainings, and know-your-rights workshops. Meanwhile, worker co-ops can prove to be a more stable and fruitful alternative to the current nail salon structure.
- **Sponsor workforce development training and English classes for adult speakers of other languages.** Supporting the development of these initiatives will create opportunities for nail salon workers to find suitable employment that aligns with their interests.
- **Fund future research projects in collaboration with institutions on ways to alleviate the health and safety hazards in nail salons.** Nail salon workers are exposed to toxic chemicals and hazardous conditions that require a better understanding on how to improve safety in the workplace.
- **Create sector-specific small business grants and loans with fewer application barriers for minority-owned businesses in the personal care and service industry.** Funding for bilingual support and bicultural outreach for these relief efforts will facilitate access for small business owners and workers.



## THE NAIL SALON INDUSTRY SERVES AS A BEDROCK TO THE MASSACHUSETTS VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY. SUPPORTING NAIL SALON WORKERS IS INTEGRAL TO SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINING OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES MOVING FORWARD.

### FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

- **Include nail salon workers and owners in any critical decision-making and proposed regulations.** Vietnamese Americans make up a majority of the nail salon industry locally and nationally, but the most vulnerable members of this group are often left out of decisions that impact their health, safety, and livelihood. Any proposed measures that impact nail salon workers must include input from workers and owners in the industry.
- **Collaborate extensively with established non-profit organizations and community leaders to create appropriate systems for outreach and direct services.** Because non-profit organizations and community leaders are often the first touchpoint for the Vietnamese immigrant community, future collaborations should seek to support the work of community organizations while expanding their reach through similar models.
- **Hire bilingual and bicultural staff at all government agencies for outreach, advocacy, and services to workers with limited English proficiency.** This can include publishing more translated materials, creating informational videos in multiple languages, making multilingual applications available on user-friendly interfaces, and having phone lines that are staffed by more bilingual and bicultural employees.
- **Restructure the unemployment benefits system to provide a holistic review that acknowledges low-wage and limited English proficient workers who face economic and language barriers to benefits.** An unemployment benefits system with more flexible guidelines for unemployment eligibility will ensure that vulnerable workers who lose work can afford basic living costs for a sufficient duration of time.
- **Provide state and city funding to support salons installing proper ventilation systems to decrease exposure to chemicals.** Although Boston already requires proper ventilation systems, most of Massachusetts does not. Salons without long-term leases may run into issues with upfront capital for installation of these costly systems. By offering financial assistance to install these systems, nail salon owners will feel more inclined and have more financial freedom to invest in proper ventilation.
- **Fund future research projects in collaboration with institutions on ways to alleviate the health and safety hazards in nail salons.** Nail salon workers are exposed to toxic chemicals and hazardous conditions that require a better understanding on how to improve safety in the workplace.

### FOR CONSUMERS & COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- **Support small, locally owned Asian nail shops in your community.** Many Vietnamese-owned nail salon shops provide jobs for Vietnamese immigrant women. Recognizing the laborious nature of nail services and respecting the need for price increases will directly support workers facing the pressures of the economy, the pandemic, and rising anti-Asian violence.
  - *Tip your nail technician well every time.* Many workers are paid based on commission and depend on tips to supplement their basic living needs. Ask your local nail salon staff how best they want to be supported during this time of anti-Asian violence.
  - *Purchase gift cards, leave good reviews for the business, and share the business on social media* to encourage social circles to support the business.
- **Call local elected officials to advocate for policies that promote an equitable COVID-19 recovery plan for workers in the low-wage, personal services industry.** Even one call or email to elected officials adds pressure to support policies that directly benefit low-income immigrant and BIPOC communities.
- **Donate to initiatives that directly support workers left out of the social safety net, including undocumented workers.** Workers who are not eligible for public benefits are among the most vulnerable workers in our communities. Initiatives that provide crucial relief to these workers will help our communities fully recover from the pandemic. One example of this is the Asian Community Emergency Relief Fund, an initiative launched by Asian American organizations in Massachusetts to support vulnerable workers with food, medical and other basic expenses during this crisis.

# RESOURCES

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## VIETNAMESE AMERICAN INITIATIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT

 [WWW.VIETAID.ORG](http://WWW.VIETAID.ORG)  VIETAID  VIETAID

Community development corporation and Vietnamese social services

## GREATER BOSTON LEGAL SERVICES' ASIAN OUTREACH UNIT

 [WWW.GBLS.ORG](http://WWW.GBLS.ORG)  PHAPLYBOSTON (VIETNAMESE ONLY)

Bilingual and bicultural legal services in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese

## MASSACHUSETTS ANTI-ASIAN RACISM GUIDE

 [HTTP://BIT.LY/AARTOOLKIT](http://BIT.LY/AARTOOLKIT) (ALL CAPS)

Compiled by the Asian Pacific Islanders Civic Action Network

## RESOURCE TOOLKIT IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

 [HTTP://BIT.LY/RTCVID19](http://BIT.LY/RTCVID19) (ALL CAPS)

Compiled by the Asian American Resource Workshop

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Words cannot fully express our deep gratitude to the nail salon workers and owners who entrusted us with their experiences. We are deeply moved and inspired by their stories. We will continue to fight for and stand alongside the Vietnamese nail salon industry moving forward.

Our work is empowered by the work of nonprofits and grassroots organizations across the nation that are working tirelessly every day to protect and amplify the voices of nail salon workers. Organizations in this national alliance include: Adhikaar, California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, Freedom Inc., Hope Clinic, Mekong NYC, and VietLead.

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