

Incoming call

Me: Hello?

Father: Hey, what's going on?

Me: Nothing I'm at home. School is closed down for the rest of the semester I think.

Father: Yeah public and Jewish schools are closed too. Everybody went home early.

Me: So what does that mean? You're laid off?

Father: I think so. Our union is going to negotiate our contract it doesn't look like we're gonna get paid anytime soon.

Me: You don't have any savings?

Father: No

Me: Nothing at all?

Father: Nothing

As soon as Governor Andrew Cuomo enacted a COVID-19 lockdown mandate in New York City my family and I felt the brunt of the pandemic. Both of my parents are immigrants who were classified as “essential workers” are in constant contact with people. My father and mother are both working-class people who hold job positions heavily dominated by Black immigrants. My father specifically works two jobs as a transport driver for school kids, and the disabled and or elderly and was now suddenly faced with the reality that his job was up in the air due to the pandemic, and his stream of income was at risk. The initial phone call we had where he told me he was no longer be working immediately caused extreme anxiety on my end because whether he wanted to acknowledge it or not there was a very thin blanket of security that would assure he would stay afloat and not risk being able to pay his rent, and his bills. Like many other working-class or middle-class New Yorkers living essentially paycheck to paycheck, he was aware of the alarming reality that his survival was dependent on his labor. My father has constantly worked since he migrated over from his home country, and has only called out once for emergency appendix surgery. That was only after he completed his shift, and drove himself to the hospital where he was forced to take a couple of days off to recover. If that isn't telling to the lack of economic security and compassion in America for the working people I don't know what is. My father didn't work two jobs 7 days a week because he is a workaholic but because he had the double responsibility of supporting our family in America and his family back home. So being laid off from work not only created a double-jeopardy in terms of survival for him but also for his family back home who are still heavily dependent on his financial support. While facing financial insecurity my father contracted Coronavirus from a student on his bus and had a very touch-and-go recovery because he already had a pre-existing condition and was in his sixties. The government failed to respond quickly and effectively to the new unemployment issues and the unemployment benefits system was so overloaded with millions of New Yorkers trying to apply that it took my dad almost six months to finally receive unemployment benefits.

My mother on the other hand faced a different reality when it came to the pandemic. Working as a home health aid she was classified as an essential worker that would have to continue to work during a global pandemic. The home-health aid industry is typically dominated by immigrant women who turned to the industry because they had sparse employment options and are usually overworked, underpaid and exploited. My mother is one of those women who didn't have the advantage of having government mandates that protected her from having to work during the pandemic and collect unemployment nor did she have a strong union that was focused on negotiating safer work conditions to prevent them from contracting the virus. Instead, she was pressured and forced into working both her jobs back to back during a global pandemic. She had to go from her day job to her night job while traveling on public transportation because her jobs pressured her and other workers to double up on shifts, and come to work. She would be denied PTO, pressured into filling in on shifts for sick workers on her off days and this treatment went on until she got sick twice from sheer exhaustion and fatigue. My mother is now in her sixties and after working two jobs for twenty-plus years it has worn down her body tremendously, making it harder for her to keep working. After working from the beginning of the pandemic consistently she eventually contracted coronavirus, and by default, my sister and I contracted coronavirus as well. Getting access to proper medical care in our neighborhood of Canarsie was difficult because there are no doctor offices that are easily accessible especially during the pandemic and we were not confident in hospitals emergency rooms to provide adequate care as Black women because of numerous past experiences of not being diagnosed properly, being gaslighted by doctors and nurses, long wait times, caused us to turn to urgent care instead. Urgent Cares in our area were overwhelmed and had long lines that wrapped around the building and down the block and it took going to three separate urgent care offices till we were able to access a COVID test. But recovery for my mother was more difficult and even after she recovered from coronavirus her body is still affected by the virus. She still has difficulty breathing, walking, and standing for a long period. Her new condition has forced her into retiring early and cutting back her work shifts considerably.

While the media, and government were praising frontline workers and calling them heroes the COVID relief bills they failed to protect America's working class. Their preformative praise didn't provide hazard pay in the stimulus relief for frontline workers risking their health and their families. Nor did they allow for federally funded financial support that would make working frontline jobs during a deadly global pandemic an option, or go out their way to create strategic work schedules where they would alternate shifts for nurses, and home health aides working with the elderly to prevent burnout. It is clear that the government considers the labor of the American people more important than their lives, their families, and their survival. The lack of governmental support has caused everyone around me to fall sick one by one till eventually, my parents became sick.

Coronavirus set ablaze to the realization that the American infrastructure is deadly to the American people and especially deadly to Black people. Although Coronavirus is a new

phenomenon for the world the racial implications of COVID-19 are not. Existing racial disparities in NYC have made coronavirus destructive for Black communities. My parents represent the real realities of my community who are Black working-class people who were left extremely vulnerable to the virus and are faced with financial insecurity once their labor stops. COVID-19 racial implications are due to preexisting, and historic racial disparities in housing, healthcare, generational wealth/household income, employment opportunities, and social mobility in communities of color. This pandemic has severely highlighted how much systematic racism affecting Black people in America has been camouflaged into “normal” everyday urban settings and it is these urban settings that have made the virus a super spreader in neighborhoods like East Flatbush, Canarsie, Bed-Stuy, Greenpoint, Coney Island, etc. Due to living in dense geographic settings where there is no possibility of proper social distancing, many Black residents are disproportionately vulnerable. In urban communities like these many Black residents live in heavily populated urban settings, where buildings and people are close to one another. Due to economic strains, lack of generational wealth, and high cost of living, people that live in these communities often live in houses with more people than there are rooms so there is no possibility of social distancing, or proper quarantining. If someone is affected by the virus it is easily spread throughout the community and the household. According to research “In every age category, Black people are dying from COVID at roughly the same rate as white people a decade older (APM)”; black people no matter what age are dying rapidly because of their susceptibility to greater workplace exposures. Unlike the vast majority of white Americans, the ability to work from home, have access to sick days, or the financial ability to flee NYC and move into suburbs are preventive measures that are not afforded to Black residents. With virtually no safety net of savings, Black residents in NYC have to weigh out the risk of exposure or not going to work and losing their livelihoods and ability to support their households. Inadequate healthcare is also a factor in the outcome of COVID in Black neighborhoods because there is less access to COVID-19 testing, health professionals, and or facilities that can withstand the demand of a higher number of patients. Black people are already susceptible to preexisting health conditions such as blood pressure, hypertension, and asthma due to environmental racism and healthier food options. These preexisting health conditions when met with Coronavirus make for bigger complications where it is harder to survive the disease. All of these pre-existing conditions will continue to play a huge factor in Black Death tolls in New York City. In regard to statistics in Black deaths involving the COVID death tolls, 32,702 black Americans have lost lives from the beginning of the pandemic to August 4th. This statistic of death toll rates had an increase of 2,752 deaths that was reported just two weeks earlier. Even though black residents only make up 12.4% of our population they account for 22.6% of all deaths of any known race due to COVID-19. Black people in New York City are also two times as likely to die from coronavirus than white people, and two times as likely to be hospitalized for non-fatal COVID-19 cases. There have been over 2000+ New York City Black residents that have died from COVID-19, which is an overwhelming number compared to white or Asian death toll rates.

The government has prioritized big corporations, the 1%, and themselves when providing COVID relief packages, and massive tax cuts while debating if the American working-class people need additional COVID relief aside from the unemployment that's always at risk of being cut, and two underwhelming stimulus checks. When we see how other countries are handling this pandemic and providing monthly, consistent financial support, strict lockdowns, free medical care, and other need support we can see that the inaction of elected officials is deliberate, and calculated. Americans have had to resort to mutual aid funds, GoFundMes, and community drives to support one another and have found comfort in the saying "we are all passing around the same twenty dollars" when we should have governmental support. There is no telling when the pandemic will end but there but we as a nation will never be able to go back to life pre-pandemic. We have lost thousands of lives to the virus, our medical care system has collapsed from lack of resources, and funding, the Black unemployment rate has doubled, and thousands of people have been displaced and evicted for not being able to pay rent during this pandemic. The economic fallout will directly affect the Black community the most, and legislation should focus on making sure that the Cares Act, and COVID relief trickle down into disenfranchised communities, and frontline workers.

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