

“Yesterday was a difficult day. I fear for my people”

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 *Latest in a series of posts on the coronavirus* 

Olga Negron is a Bethlehem City Councilwoman.

What Councilwoman Olga Negron has been doing during this quarantine

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This is by far the hardest time of my work life ever! I work for a personal injury law firm, and most of the work that we do is workers compensation. With all the warehouses in the Lehigh Valley having people working 10-12 hours doing repetitive work and heavy lifting, people are getting hurt. One of my favorite parts of my job is doing “Know Your Rights” workshops. Latinos that come to the USA are trying to live “the American Dream”; they want to work and provide for their families. Many had professions back home (teachers, nurses, electricians, lawyers, doctors), and because they’ve not been able to dominate the English language well enough to get licenses or certifications needed to do their profession, they end up working in warehouses. For the most part, people are content to have a steady job, decent pay, and benefits, and now they fear losing it. On a daily basis, I deal with individuals that get hurt at work, and their rights are violated. Every day! They get hurt and are just sent to the infirmary many of these warehouses have on site. There, they are given a pack of ice and a couple of Tylenol and are sent back to the work line. That’s my usual everyday story. I serve as interpreter to our attorneys, I do the intake, and, since many end up getting fired, I help them connect with resources they might need (food stamps, Medicaid, food banks, rent assistance, etc.). Now, during COVID 19 era, there is a different story.

All our offices (we have 8) have been closed since March 16, and we are all working from home. We advertise on our local Spanish radio La Mega for over 16 years. We are using phone call redirect services: Mon to Fri 9:00 am to 5:00 pm when people call our 1-888-311-GANA, the calls go right to my cell; if I don’t answer, it goes to other co-workers until someone is able to answer. My boss did a phone interview last week at

the radio, and my phone hasn't stopped ringing. Within 4 days I got 81 calls through this number. People are scared. Many in my community are not paying attention to the news and are confused with what's going on. All of a sudden, their co-workers are testing positive for COVID 19, and everyone is scared. Many don't have childcare, and way too many are testing positive for COVID 19. Employers continue to let people work elbow to elbow and not using any kind of PPE. I continue to provide them with the local police non-emergency number or state police number to place the complaint about the dangerous working conditions and continue to explain how to apply for unemployment.

Meanwhile I get to listen to their many concerns. Yesterday I got to talk with 3 individuals who tested positive to COVID 19, and the conversations changed a bit. They are scared, crying, coughing, and saying they fear for their co-workers as they will all end up with COVID 19 because they continue to work next to each other, touching the items they are working with and passing it to the co-worker standing next to them. Not wearing PPE . . . Scared and wondering how they will get food once they finish what they have at home, wondering if they will get to live through this virus. While other calls were from individuals saying 3 co-workers tested positive for COVID 19 yesterday. They were told the employer disinfected the factory, and they are calling them to go back to work, but they haven't changed anything in terms of PPE or distancing between co-workers. They are afraid and don't want to go back. They are now being forced to choose between their job and their life!

I love my job, and I have always enjoyed being there for people when they need me the most, as well as educating them about their rights and fighting for justice. It has often been hard listening to what people go through to keep their job, but I have never felt so heartbroken before. Yesterday was a difficult day. I fear for my people. I will need to take a few days off just for my well-being. It has been hard listening to stories all day long. And if I don't take care of myself, I can't be there for anyone else. To everyone reading this: take care of yourselves, take this pandemic seriously, for your sake and for the sake of our community.