

# SERVING UP JUSTICE

## Abortion access and reproductive justice in restaurant work

Restaurant & food service workers comprise 10% of the American workforce.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the variety of backgrounds, experiences, and jobs that people have in the sector, it is important to see reproductive justice issues that face food service workers in the context of affecting one in ten working people in the United States.

In operating the reproductive hotline for California, supporting people in their decisions around pregnancy, and providing logistical assistance for callers accessing abortion, ACCESS Women's Health Justice comes into contact with restaurant workers at the moment of need in a reproductive experience. In addition, many of our staff and volunteers also work in the restaurant sector and have had experiences similar to callers.

1 in 10 people in the US live in California. While the state is often lauded for progressive values, many people still struggle to access abortion care, and we have the highest poverty rate in the U.S. when adjusted for the cost of living.<sup>2</sup> The following caller stories illustrate some of the ways abortion access and reproductive justice intersect with the lives of food service workers in the state California.

### SUSAN\*

Susan worked as a server in a tourist area. She was separated from her husband and was barely making ends meet raising her two kids. A friend that Susan worked with told her about an expedited Medi-Cal program for pregnancy.

When Susan went to apply, the Medi-Cal case-worker told Susan that she herself had "a daughter who was a waitress and made a lot of money." The case-worker took 3 weeks to get back to Susan and then told her she did not qualify for Medi-Cal, even though Susan was eligible. By that time, Susan was 14 weeks along, meaning her procedure would take two days instead of one, and she would have to miss more work. ACCESS coached her on how to advocate for herself at the Medi-Cal office. Susan shared that she was really struggling financially and that her husband was not contributing at all.

ACCESS Women's Health Justice operates the bilingual Reproductive Healthline in California. ACCESS provides free, confidential and non-judgmental referrals, peer counseling, and logistical information on the full range of reproductive health services including pregnancy, parenting, abortion and adoption. The majority of ACCESS Healthline callers are young women of color who are uninsured (26%) or have Medi-Cal (37%). Cost is often their primary barrier to accessing timely health care. When callers are facing transportation barriers to get to an abortion, ACCESS connects them with a statewide network of over 100 volunteers who offer rides, a couch to sleep on, and a human connection. Through these hours on the phone, on drives and in homes, ACCESS bears witness to how social injustice affects California communities.

**Medicaid** is a national, publicly-funded health insurance for low-income people in the U.S. **Medi-Cal** is California's Medicaid program. It compensates for gaps resulting from the Hyde Amendment in the federal standard of minimum coverage requirements, and unlike 17 other states, covers abortion.

### Cash Tips

For many restaurant workers, cash tips fluctuate day-to-day, week-to-week, and by season. Tipped workers have no way to reliably project future income and can face difficulty getting assistance as eligibility for social programs is based on past earnings. Earning more in a prior month does not mean a person will continue earning that much, or be able to afford an abortion. Like with Susan, other people's perceptions of their earnings or ability to pick up additional shifts can have an impact as well.

### Scheduling and Paid Time Off

The majority of restaurant workers receive their schedules no more than a week or two weeks in advance. Few can get paid time off, so missing a shift means lost wages. If a restaurant worker can't get their shift covered, they may have to go into work - or risk losing their job. This can make it difficult to take time off work for medical care, especially if someone needs time to travel long distances to an abortion clinic. Some pick up shifts later to make up for lost wages or to return coverage, which can make it difficult to recuperate from a medical procedure.

## LUPE\*

Lupe was an undocumented teen working at a restaurant in the Bay Area and not attending school. She had not told anyone that she was raped crossing the border from Mexico to the US and had become pregnant. She was worried that her father and brothers might think she brought this upon herself.

She confided in a friend at work who told her to try Planned Parenthood. She took time off work to go to her appointment, but was too far along to be seen at that location. She was referred to another clinic, where she was told the cost would now be \$1,200. The second clinic told her to try to get Medi-Cal, but she was incorrectly denied coverage at the social services office. Lupe worked to save the money, but when she had saved \$800, her brother had an emergency and needed the money.

She found out about ACCESS and called for support. ACCESS walked Lupe through the process of enrolling in a type of insurance known as Medi-Cal for Pregnancy, a state program that provides full coverage for prenatal care or abortion for anyone up to 213% of the federal poverty level, regardless of immigration status. Lupe took time off work again to get her abortion and one of our volunteers drove her to her appointment in San Francisco and back home.

### Rates of Insurance Coverage

Like the majority of food service workers, Lupe did not have the option of employer sponsored health insurance. Insurance coverage could have helped cover the cost of her abortion, which would have saved her the emotional rollercoaster of trying to figure out how to pay out-of-pocket. Only 20% of workers in the accommodation and food service industry have insurance coverage provided by their employers -- the lowest rate of any major industry in CA.<sup>3</sup> According to the Center for Policy Initiatives, "low-wage jobs are linked to a lack of health coverage, whether analyzed by industry or occupation. This means workers who are least able to afford medical expenses on their own because of low income are also least likely to have employer-provided health coverage."<sup>4</sup>

### Support People

Lupe did not feel comfortable telling her father or brothers, but eventually told a female coworker

who connected her to Planned Parenthood. In Lupe's restaurant workplace, she found a supportive ally in her coworker. This support was central in Lupe's journey. But if a pregnant person's main support comes from a coworker, and that coworker helps by covering shifts to make it possible for them to miss work to seek health care - who is left to provide support during the procedure?

## Conclusion

There are many factors impacting abortion access for restaurant and food service workers. Beyond abortion access, there are a variety of pressing reproductive justice issues impacting the lives of restaurant workers (below).

Like most forms of employment, food service work has its advantages and drawbacks. For some ACCESS volunteers, working in the restaurant sector provides an opportunity to participate in community work that occurs from 9 to 5.

ACCESS sees the issues of access to reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice as social justice and human rights issues, and works to advance a movement that promotes the health and well-being of a person, their family, and community. A shift in the culture of the restaurant industry would make a tremendous impact on the lives of workers and their families.

### Endnotes

1. "Facts at a Glance." National Restaurant Association. <http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/Research/Facts-at-a-Glance>
2. Khan, Surina. "California's Success Depends on Lifting up Poor Women." Women's Foundation of California. <http://www.womensfoundca.org/california%E2%80%99s-success-depends-lifting-poor-women>
3. "The Working Uninsured." p.3, 6, 8. Center on Policy Initiatives. <http://www.forworkingfamilies.org/sites/pwff/files/publications/archive/cpi/TheWorkingUninsuredReport.pdf>
4. Ibid.

\*ACCESS received permission to share these stories on the condition that their real names are not used. Susan and Lupe are not their real names.

## REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE ISSUES BEYOND ABORTION

- Restaurant work is a means to support one's family. When there are racialized and gendered divisions of labor with little room for advancement, it impacts the ability of a person to experience and provide economic security for their family.
- There are high rates of sexual harassment and assault from coworkers, bosses, and customers across the industry.
- Working long hours without eating, sitting, or using the bathroom can have serious health implications for restaurant workers -- especially people with chronic health conditions and people who are pregnant. Labor laws often go unenforced.
- Restaurant workers are often not able to change roles in the work place to accommodate health needs such as pregnancy.

To order copies of this publication or for permission to reproduce any part of it, please contact us at:

**ACCESS Women's Health Justice**  
PO Pox 3609  
Oakland, CA 94609  
Tel: 510.923.0739  
Fax: 510.923.0014  
[info@accesswhj.org](mailto:info@accesswhj.org)

**Primary Author:**  
Sara Spriggs

**Additional Support Provided by:** Samara Azam-Yu, Gabriela Castillo, Rachel Coe