

**For Immediate Release:** March 2, 2020

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**STATEMENT:**

**ROC United Urges Restaurants to Protect their Employees  
and Customers from Coronavirus; Calls for Immediate  
Implementation of Paid Sick Leave Benefits**

As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed community transmission of Covid-19 – the official name of the disease caused by the new coronavirus – in the United States, it is imperative that restaurants take positive and precautionary steps to protect the health of their employees and customers.

Despite some conflicting messages from the top of the Administration that make official government pronouncements seem to be unreliable, the CDC remains a competent and trustworthy source of information and should be used as a primary resource for guidance. We encourage everyone to review the information available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

All information derived in this statement has been drawn from the CDC, other competent international health bodies, and our own primary and secondary research as noted.

As of today, all available evidence suggests that the public can continue patronizing restaurants. However, restaurants should take the following measures to protect and promote public health and encourage the confidence of the public.

According to the CDC, the primary method the coronavirus disease spreads and gets transmitted is through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. A secondary method that a person can get Covid-19 is by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.

Restaurants should ensure their staff cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when they cough or sneeze and immediately discard the tissue, and regularly wash their hands based on best practices (see attachment below). Restaurants should also remind their staff to avoid touching their eyes, nose, or mouth.

Masks are not recommended for healthy individuals for they may reduce the supply of masks available to patients tested positive for the coronavirus and health professionals who are constantly in contact with them.

There is no official restriction on shaking hands, but handshakes transmit 10 times more bacteria than fist bumps, and health officials have recommended limiting the practice.<sup>1,2</sup>

Employers should communicate these measures regularly through pre-shift meetings, and practice fist and elbow bumps as an alternative to handshakes.

Restaurants must immediately adopt a paid sick leave policy, where it is not yet in place or is not required by law, and should clearly communicate this policy to their employees. *Any employee who exhibits flu-like symptoms should be allowed to rest at home, without fear of retaliation.*

It is a tremendous challenge for restaurant workers who already earn among the lowest wages in the country to afford to stay home from work when they are ill. For tipped workers this can be especially challenging since the federal subminimum wage is \$2.13 per hour and they depend on tips from customers for their base wage. Along with ensuring all workers earn the full minimum wage, adoption of a paid sick leave is essential.

“Without paid sick leave benefits, I have to push myself and show up at work, even if I am feeling sick,” said Portia Green, a bartender and member of ROC United. “Like millions of restaurant workers across the country, this is the kind of sacrifice I have to make because ‘no work’ means ‘no pay for me.’”

“For now, I could only pop a vitamin C, hoping that it would help prevent a disease. I just can’t afford to miss a work day or two because it’s my family that will suffer the most. Paid sick days would mean a lot to me and my family’s safety and security,” Green added.

Prior to Covid-19, advocates and workers around the country have called on legislators to enact seven days of paid sick leave per year as outlined in the Healthy Families Act. Restaurant owners should also ask their representatives to quickly adopt state and national paid sick leave policies to demonstrate their commitment to the health of their employees and guests, as well as to avoid a competitive disadvantage.

Currently, there are over 35 localities, including ten states and Washington, DC, that have implemented paid sick days. As a result, 25 percent of all restaurant workers are entitled to paid sick days. However, our research has found that *in jurisdictions that have enacted paid sick leave*, fewer than 30 percent of workers are aware of and have access to paid sick leave, over 60 percent have worked while ill, and over 36 percent of them report making a coworker ill as a

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<sup>1</sup> Mela, S., & Whitworth, D. E. (2014). The fist bump: A more hygienic alternative to the handshake. *American Journal of Infection Control*, 42(8), 916–917. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajic.2014.04.011>

<sup>2</sup> Sklansky, M., Nadkarni, N., & Ramirez-Avila, L. (2014, June 25). Banning the handshake from the health care setting. *JAMA - Journal of the American Medical Association*. American Medical Association. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2014.4675>

result.<sup>3</sup> Local health officials must take immediate action to ensure paid sick leave benefits are being universally applied.

States, like Michigan, that have the possibility of enacting paid sick leave through executive action should do so. State legislatures, such as in New York, that are considering state wide policies should act quickly to enact them, and jurisdictions, such as Pittsburgh, should speed up the adoption and implementation of paid sick days.

Our own anecdotal evidence suggests that prejudice and fear have already impacted sales at Chinese restaurants. There is no reason to fear eating at a Chinese or any other ethnic restaurants. However, even if a coronavirus infection is traced to only one particular restaurant, all restaurants can expect to see their sales impacted due to the rapid spread of misinformation on social media.<sup>4</sup> This will not only impact restaurant owners' revenue, but it will also impact all of their employees -- many of whom are barely able to make ends meet.

The leisure and hospitality industry has been severely impacted around the world by the spread of Covid-19, with once bustling tourist destinations now quiet and empty. The quicker we adopt universal standards to control the spread of the coronavirus, the quicker the international leisure and hospitality industry will recover its positive growth trend.

Available information suggests that Covid-19 is not lethal for healthy individuals, but can lead to severe illness including death for anyone who is immuno-compromised. It is a novel disease with no natural immunity so it can spread quickly across individuals. Therefore, everyone should take these necessary measures seriously to protect all immuno-compromised friends and loved ones.

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Food Quality and Safety recommends the following best practices around hand washing.<sup>5</sup>

Employees should wash their hands:

- When they first enter the work area, and anytime workers are coming from outside the work area, whether they are first coming in for the day or coming from another part of the building, they need to wash their hands to get rid of any germs they might have picked up in other areas;
- Immediately before touching or working with food, food-processing equipment that comes in contact with food, or packaging materials that would come in contact with food;

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<sup>3</sup> See, in particular: Behind the Kitchen Door: The Promise of Opportunity in the San Francisco and Oakland Bay Area Restaurant Industry, 2016; Behind the Kitchen Door: The Highs and Lows of Seattle's Booming Restaurant Economy, 2015; and Behind the Kitchen Door: Promise and Denial in Boston's Growing Restaurant Industry, 2016, New York, NY: ROC United.

<sup>4</sup> Horowitz, J. (February 1, 2016). It's Not the Plague, but Milan Isn't Itself Either. *New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/europe/milan-coronavirus.html>

<sup>5</sup> Spiegel, K. (February 1, 2016). Handwashing and Sanitizers Important to Food Safety. *Food Quality and Safety*. Available at: <https://www.foodqualityandsafety.com/article/handwashing-and-sanitizers/>

- Immediately after taking a break or using the restroom. If workers have to open doors or touch surfaces to get to their specific work area, they should wash their hands again once they get to where they are going to be working;
- Immediately after coughing, sneezing, using a tissue or handkerchief, or smoking or eating;
- After touching dirty utensils or equipment, or when the potential for cross-contamination between dirty items and clean items or food exists;
- Whenever they are switching from working with raw, uncooked food to food that is prepared or cooked;
- After wiping hands on an apron, uniform or body parts other than clean hands or arms;
- Prior to and after removing gloves; people often treat gloves as if the gloves are preventing the spread of foodborne germs, but the purpose of gloves is more to act like a second layer of skin for protecting employees, not the food or others;
- After they have handled money or after interacting with people at a counter or drive-thru and before they go back to working with food;
- Any time they need to remove oil and grease from their hands. Also, workers should wash their hands after taking garbage out or after using a dumpster. Basically, anytime workers touch anything that's dirty, they need to wash their hands. In addition, workers should wash their hands after cleaning customer restrooms.