

The emotional cost of saving the world: Understanding the new normal for front- liners

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Experts discuss the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic through the eyes of AAPI first responders

On a regular day, working in a hospital can present unbelievable scenarios that strain the mind, body and heart.

During a pandemic, that magnifies to a degree of which most people will never see the likes.

The greater population, in the last several weeks, has expressed reverence toward those working in the medical field, during the pandemic and otherwise. And this being National Nurses Week and Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, the attention to and appreciation for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) working these essential jobs feels most fitting.

“From the outside when we look at these people, they’re strong and they’re resilient, but what they’re going through on a day-to-day basis [takes] a toll on their mental and emotional health,” said Cindy Shin, founder and CEO of KACIE Strategies, an organization dedicated to meaningful partnerships with California’s diverse communities.

KACIE Strategies is currently hosting weekly roundtables with leaders and experts to help the community better understand the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic is affecting different areas of California life.

And while most people have had their lives put to a halt due to shelter-in-place orders, for medical professionals and other “essential” workers, their dials have been turned up with their work becoming more crucial than ever.

“They still respond to people in distress for a variety of different reasons,” former LA County Sheriff Jim McDonnell said during the meeting. “Their roles and responsibilities remain unchanged in that regard, but the environment that they’re going into, however, has changed.”

Although nurses, doctors, firefighters, police officers and EMTs are the face of the COVID-19 front lines, other essential workers are also putting their lives on the line.

McDonnell, who worked in law enforcement for more than 30 years, stressed the expanded definition of “first responder” to include grocery workers, deliverers and other essential workers who’ve had their jobs elevated as the pandemic ballooned over the last two months.

The former sheriff expressed admiration for those who are “dealing with the public in grocery stores” and applauded the newfound appreciation for those workers risking their lives and family’s lives by continuing to work.

Moreover, as local and state jurisdictions begin to reopen (prematurely, according to public health officials), these first responders are at a far greater risk. The physical dangers of that risk coalesce with the emotional and mental hardships that come with working in an environment that has been overtaken by a silent killer.

Public health officials, medical professionals and scientists working within the confines of pandemics face a specific kind of distress that further erases the demarcations of personal and professional concerns.

Professor and licensed psychologist Dr. Michi Fu of the American Psychological Association (APA) referenced the psychosocial model, a psychological approach to observing an individual and the effect that their social environment has on their mental health. People who work in the areas of science and medicine are going to be more acutely aware of the pandemic's severity.

“When you're informed and looking at science and studying epidemiology, you're probably going to feel a great level of anxiety because of looking at things like how the Spanish Flu had three waves, so understanding that and trying to cope with that might be foremost on their mind,” Dr. Fu said during the roundtable.

The psychological toll on medical professionals, especially, comprises things like caregiver burnout in which people who work in convalescent homes, for example, may be exposed to the virus on a daily basis and experience “horrific” tragedies while on the job. However, because of physical distancing, they can't go home afterward and be with their families, Fu said.

The doctor also discussed the unique struggle of moral injury that medical workers are facing today. Choosing to work in the realm of patient care means taking an oath to save as many lives as you can. But today, nurses across the state of California are protesting for safer, hygienic workplace practices to protect nurses, which are seeing a higher infection rate among those working at Kaiser Permanente.

The moral injury of trying to square a nurse's instinct to save lives while also taking time to fight against “dangerous mask decontamination systems” (and the practice of reprocessing other personal protective equipment) is slowly becoming a greater stress among all nurses.

“Most people when they go into helping professions, go into [it to] help everyone that they can. They're not trying to distinguish between who deserves more resources,” Fu said. “There's a lot of moral injury, not just related to the possibility that you yourself and your family will get sick and can I care for my patients adequately, but it's also do you feel protected enough to feel good about your job.”

Nurses and doctors, in particular, are being labeled as the real heroes of our time, quite literally saving the world one person at a time. Displays of appreciation have manifested themselves in advertisements from companies like McDonald's and Dove thanking nurses and celebrity-run fundraisers and charity drives.

In New York City, officials have begun daily cheers at 7 p.m. where residents stop to clap, cheer and honk in solidarity outside of hospitals for the frontliners of the pandemic. On a smaller community level, small businesses have helped feed medical staff, firefighters and those in law enforcement, many of whom have been working non-stop since the beginning of the emergency, as previously reported in the *Asian Journal*.

But while the appreciation for doctors and nurses is a much-needed sliver of positivity, Fu noted that there “were some stories about people feeling mixed about the 7 p.m. cheers because on one hand, they’re saying, ‘It feels great knowing that people are behind us, but I didn’t sign up to be a hero.’”

And even though people are lionizing health care workers and front-liners during this pandemic, the recognition can often feel purely symbolic rather than genuine gratitude, especially for AAPI front liners.

The rich AAPI community within the patient care sphere is vast. The global network of Filipino nurses, in particular, is a keystone of the Filipino identity, with the Philippines being the largest exporter of nurses in the world, according to a study from Health Services Research.

And given the recent uptick of anti-Asian sentiments, harassment, violence and microaggressions coinciding with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, the “added layer of being Asian American” for AAPI health care workers can be “a complicating factor during such times,” Fu shared.

“It’s a very complicated feeling of being despised by society and blamed for something while also trying to be a part of the solution,” she added, also factoring in the long-understood stigmatization of mental health within the AAPI community as another emotional roadblock.

Community organizations that have set up hate crime hotlines to track COVID-19-related acts of hate against Asians, like the one at the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council which, since mid-March, has reported more than 1,500 cases of anti-Asian aggression, as previously reported in the *Asian Journal*.

“We’ve certainly seen the thousands of cases, and it doesn’t matter if you’re a toddler, or a senior, you might get slashed or kicked in the back,” Fu said. “These kinds of things have happened, not just in the states, but in other parts of the world where someone’s trying to go to work as a frontline medical worker and they’re being called something racist. And then they have to roll up their sleeves and act like a hero.”

