

3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting Translating Breast Cancer and Environmental Research into Action

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Julia Liou is a co-founder of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, which advances a preventive agenda to assure the health and safety of nail and beauty salon communities. The Collaborative integrates policy advocacy, research, outreach and education. It is composed of over 20 public health and environmental advocates, nail salon workers and owners, community groups and allies in public agencies.

As the Planning and Development Manager of Asian Health Services (AHS), a comprehensive community health center located in Oakland Chinatown, Liou became aware of the health problems of nail salon workers while doing outreach in the Vietnamese community. AHS found that there were an unexpectedly high number of cases of chronic asthma, dermatitis, and respiratory illnesses, as well as anecdotal evidence of high levels of birth defects and spontaneous miscarriages in nail salon workers.

Liou noted that many nail and personal care products contain chemicals known to be carcinogenic and harmful to reproductive health. Although some of these chemicals have already been banned in Europe, cosmetics manufacturing is not regulated in the United States.

Some of the concerns of the Collaborative have to do with the population at risk. As Yvonne Beals mentioned earlier in the Town Hall Meeting, most nail salon workers are Vietnamese immigrants and most of them are of reproductive age. Workers have indicated that they develop breathing problems, skin irritations, chronic structural pain, and irritations of the nose and throat. There is insufficient ventilation in the shops and a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate educational materials.

Many of the workers have already experienced homeland exposures to chemical warfare in Vietnam and may already have unacceptably high toxic burdens. They are unfamiliar with U.S. legal and health care systems, and work very long days with no benefits or job security.

A survey taken by the Nail Collaborative showed that workers believed the products with which they work have adverse health effects, they prefer not to remain in the business for too long because of health concerns, and report that they will leave their work when they become pregnant saying that it is not a healthy environment for a child.

These young women are drawn to their work by the low barriers to entry: short training period, inexpensive, does not require high proficiency in English, flexible work schedules, and because there are many other Vietnamese doing work in the industry as instructors and shop owners.

Liou applauded the work of Senator Carole Migden in the passage of the Safe Cosmetics Act, which was moved forward with the assistance of the Collaborative and other groups and individuals.

Currently, the AHS and Northern California Cancer Center are collaborating on a community research project to better characterize the workforce and understand their concerns. A second phase of the research will do an air ventilation study with workers and match breast cancer registry and nail shop licensee files.

AHS is guided by the following principles: to identify practices that benefit both workers and small employers; to target manufacturers of harmful products; to unify their collective voices and respective strengths to leverage greater power.

Liou closed her presentation by appealing to the Town Hall Meeting participants to help the Collaborative by identifying nail salon workers, owners, students and family members who are willing to tell their stories. She asked that people participate in legislative visits, write letters, help raise awareness and support legislation to counteract the powerful cosmetics lobby that opposes chemical bans.