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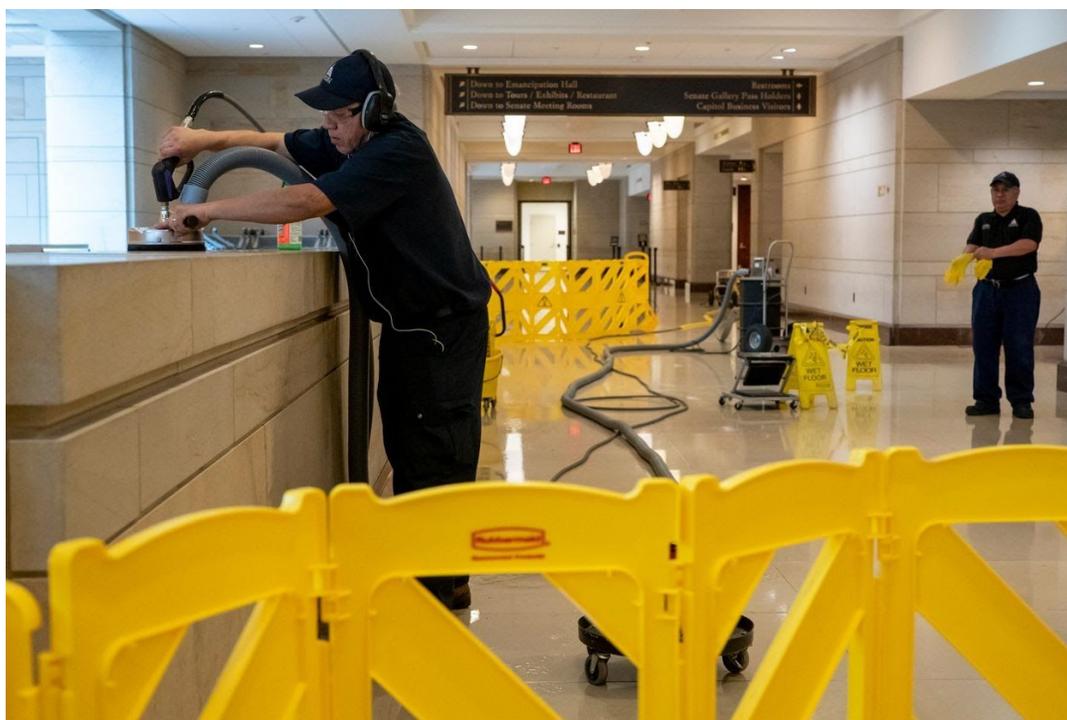
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## ‘I’m Very Scared’: Janitors on Front Lines of Coronavirus Outbreak

*Cleaners, many lacking paid sick leave, say they are concerned about exposure to the virus as they clean offices, planes and medical facilities; ‘We are an afterthought’*

By [Lauren Weber](#) and [Chip Cutter](#)

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As fears of the new coronavirus’s spread have grown, so has the burden placed on janitors and cleaners, some of the lowest-paid workers in the U.S.

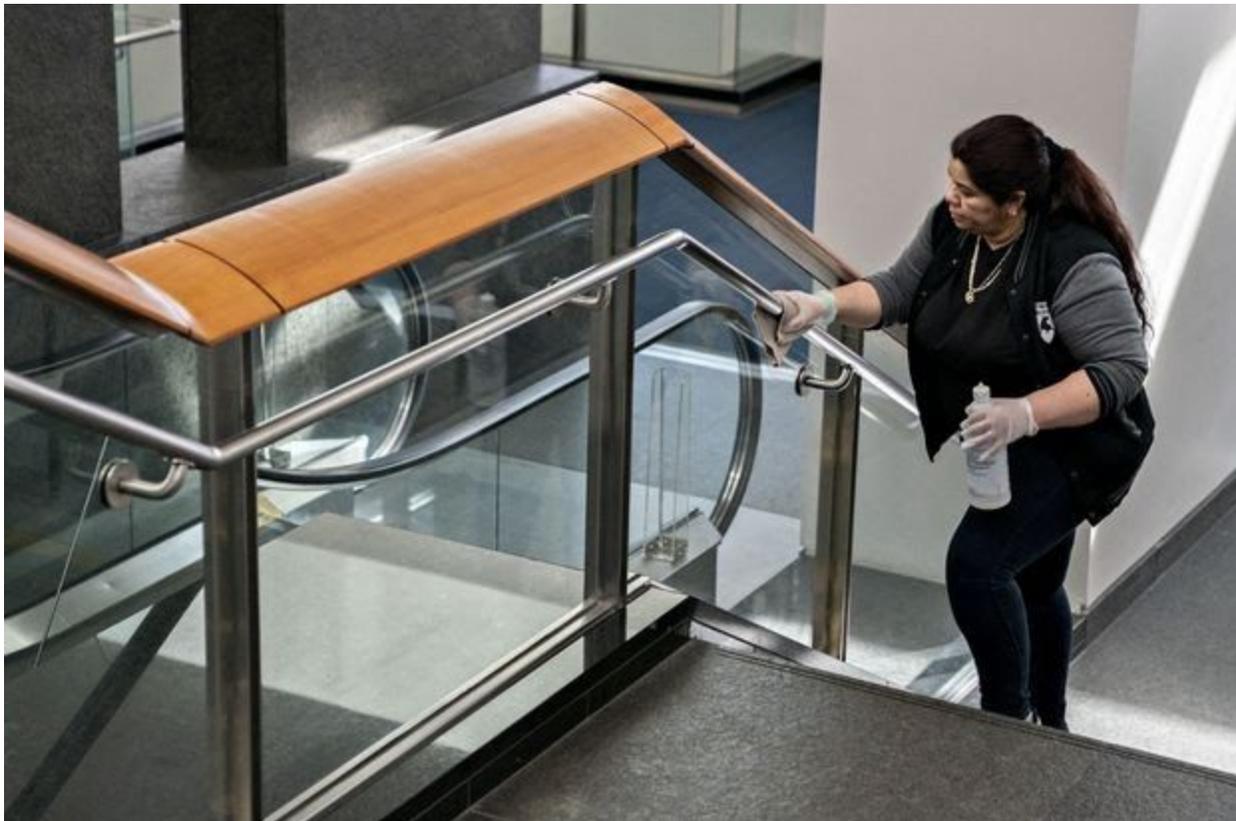
Some say they are anxious about exposure to the virus as they clean the toilets, kitchens and surfaces touched by dozens or hundreds of people a day in offices, stores and restaurants. Many lack paid sick days, according to workers and employers, fanning their worries about

falling ill. They say their work is now harder and riskier than before, yet the pay often remains the same.

Yancy Betterly, a 45-year-old owner of a small janitorial firm based near Orlando, Fla., cleans office buildings, outpatient-care clinics and other facilities. He says the outbreak makes his crews' job more difficult.

Many clients have called and asked him to step up cleaning beyond what is spelled out in his contracts, he says. Some want crews to wipe down hundreds of desks or phones nightly. Others ask if he's disinfected the copy machine. The extra work can add hours to each job, although Mr. Betterly said he is often not getting paid more, because he works under existing cleaning contracts.

He says he wants to give clients the service they expect and doesn't feel that he has the leverage to push back on the extra hours or potential exposure. "We are the bottom rung," said Mr. Betterly, who says he can't afford health insurance or paid sick time for himself or his workers. "We are an afterthought of an afterthought. Nobody really talks about the janitors."



A worker disinfecting a railing at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., on March 9.

PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Tom Buiocchi, chief executive of ServiceChannel, a software provider that helps large companies order cleaning and maintenance services, says that when companies ask for cleaning services above what is spelled out in contracts, they should also pay more. Cleaning companies work to maintain multiyear relationships with customers, so if those clients ask for additional cleaning, “you do it, and you do it for a price,” Mr. Buiocchi said.

The median wage for the nation’s 2.2 million janitors and cleaners was \$12.55 an hour in May 2018, according to the latest federal statistics. It was \$11.43 an hour for the nearly one million maids and housekeepers.

Elsa Romero, 56, is a janitor at the Miami Tower, among the tallest skyscrapers in Florida, where she works from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. weekdays for \$9 an hour. She said she cleans bathrooms, offices and office kitchens, encountering dirty tissues and other materials with bodily fluids.

Since the scope of the virus’s spread has become clearer, her employer, an outsourced cleaning company called SFM Services Inc., has reminded staff to wear gloves, wash their hands and use antibacterial lotion.

It hasn’t extended paid sick days to employees, said Ms. Romero, who takes home about \$700 a month. If she feels ill, “I go to work anyway because for me to lose a day of work is very hard,” she said through a Spanish translator. Ms. Romero, who is diabetic, has a health-insurance plan she purchases for \$100 a month that doesn’t fully cover her insulin costs, leading her to ration.

SFM Services, based in Hialeah Gardens, Fla., declined to comment.

Before the coronavirus added new risk, Ms. Romero had been trying to organize a union with her co-workers and assistance from the Service Employees International Union, hoping to win an increase in wages and better benefits, including sick leave.

“I’m very scared about catching the virus, but I am praying to God that nothing will happen,” she said. “I live by myself. I pay all my bills. I don’t want to be a burden to my daughters.”

Work requests are soaring, said Mr. Buiocchi of ServiceChannel. From mid-February through early March, work orders from health-care-related offices are up 66% compared with the same period in 2018 and 2019, he said. Requests from restaurants and grocery stores increased 53% and 18%, respectively.

Every business has a different set of concerns. “For restaurants, it’s cooking equipment and eating surfaces. Shopping carts are a huge problem in grocery stores,” Mr. Buiocchi said, adding that companies want more frequent cleaning with stronger chemicals.

More potent cleaning products can sometimes require workers with special training. Spaulding Decon, an environmental cleanup company in Tampa, Fla., has hired two new administrative assistants recently to handle an endless stream of calls for additional cleaning services, said CEO Laura Spaulding.

Many cleaners are working 14- to 16-hour days, she said, and typically get paid \$14 to \$30 an hour, depending on their training. Her workers tend to be more highly paid because instead of doing regular housekeeping, they are responding to crime and accident scenes, such as methamphetamine labs and the sites of suicides, she said. Crews already wear full protective gear and know how to handle tough jobs.

“They’re looking at this like, ‘This is nothing compared to what we normally do,’ ” she said, adding that the extra work—and pay—is a silver lining for them in this hard time.