

Opportunities Fund Project Report – Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre

Creating Standards for Improved Health and Employment Conditions in the Discount Nail Salon Sector

September 2022

The discount nail salon sector in Toronto is predominantly women in low income, precarious jobs. It has many workplace issues, such as health hazards and labour violations. Since 2013, the Nail Salon Workers Project (NSWP) at Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre (PQWCHC) has been engaged in community development work in this sector, with the aim of improving working conditions and reducing health risks for nail technicians (see www.pqwchc.ca/nails). The NSWP work is guided by the interests and needs of the nail salon communities. Through previous focus groups, interviews, and ongoing informal needs assessments, nail technicians and owners have articulated an interest in a healthy salon recognition program¹. This is a program that supports and rewards salons for making healthier and safer workplaces for everyone (clients and workers) in the salon.

This Metcalf-funded project explored the idea of a healthy salon recognition program with salons in Toronto. We engaged the community of nail technicians and owners through individual interviews, focus groups and onsite visits.

Despite several challenges (see section toward the end of the report), the project team carried out meaningful engagement opportunities and as a result, gained significant feedback and input from the communities, and provided spaces for nail technicians and owners to begin the process of reconnecting after the massive disruptions to the sector and NSWP community engagement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While implementing a healthy salon recognition program is not appropriate for the community at this time, this exploration process was an important activity for the community to have the chance to further explore this idea and elements of a recognition program, defined by the communities, can be used in the future and/or to inform other more immediate action.

A description of the project activities and findings are detailed in this report. And a summary of our recommended next steps is articulated.

Individual Interviews Qualitative Summary

The outreach team conducted individual interviews with nail technicians and owners. The goal was to identify the most important things for the participants with respect to working in nail salons and what makes a salon a good place to work (versus being a “bad salon” to work at). The input from these interviews guided the next phase and content of the focus group. A total of 30 nail technicians were interviewed. Here is a summary of the findings from the interviews:

- 100% of the respondents want to be part of a healthy salon recognition program.
- The majority of participants liked the health and safety aspects the most, such as better ventilation, safer nail and related products, and good sanitation and disposal practices. They also mentioned having proper PPE, which is more likely COVID-related rather than related to pre-pandemic circumstances.

¹ We have learned many things from the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative. We introduced their Healthy Salon Recognition Program (Healthy Nail Salon Recognition Program | Department of Toxic Substances Control (ca.gov)) to nail technicians and owners in various focus groups and workshops in the past as an option for future activities here in Toronto. Technicians and owners have shown interest in exploring this concept for years.

- The main challenge, according to the responses, is the cost of improving the working environment; particularly installing air ventilation and purchasing safer nail and related products. This is even more challenging now because business has not been good for almost three years².

Health and Safety

- The most common responses to questions about health and safety were better air ventilation, safer nail and related products, good cleaning and disinfecting practices, and access to PPE. The others are better ergonomics, separate room for breaks and access to health and safety information.
- Respondents spend long hours in the salon environment and therefore see the impacts of a healthy salon as important to their health and safety.
- More than 80% of respondents made health and safety the priority in making the salon a good place to work. But only half of them said that their salons have done well in this area. More than 60% felt that the salons they work in could do better.
- Cleaning and disinfecting and access to PPE were mentioned frequently. This demonstrates the impact of COVID on the sectors' health priorities, possibly at the expense of other significant, pre-existing health risks³.

Labour Issues

- Labour rights was the second most common issue mentioned in responses.
- Only 33% of respondents said they get minimum wage, paid sick/vacation days, and are paid on time.
- Close to 30% said that their commission earned is less than the minimum wage after spending long hours in the salon with little business. This is made worse by having long shifts (e.g. inability to work elsewhere and mental health impacts) and unfair practices by salon owners.
- More than 40% want a base rate of pay. It is better to have a minimum guaranteed income as business is more unpredictable during the pandemic. They also want paid sick/vacation pay, time off, shorter work shifts (e.g. eight-hour workday and breaks).
- Based on their responses, there is no doubt that labour right violations are widespread. These will negatively impact their health in the long run. Not making a living wage forces them to work longer shifts without the ability to take time off to seek medical services or to rest.

Training

- Nail technicians want training to further develop their nail skills; this is understood to bring in more business.
- Respondents want language-specific training on health issues and better access to information. English is the second language for all the respondents.

Relationships

- Many respondents commented about relationships as part of a good place to work. This includes: good customer service, having good work relationships, and good customers.
- Respondents want their employers to treat them fairly, and do not want to compete with each other for customers.

² The lowest time for business in the discount nail salon sector is the winter months. So the pandemic (in Canada) starting in March 2022 came at the end of their lowest season.

³ AR Ford, 2014, "Overexposed, Underinformed": Nail Salon Workers and Hazards to Their Health / A Review of the Literature, National Network on Environments and Women's Health.

Effecting Change

- 43% felt that any change is up to the owners; they decide and implement the change. Many respondents felt nail technicians are powerless to effect changes since owners are not responsive to their concerns/refuse to make changes.
- Opportunities for change were indicated as follows:
 - Access to health and safety training provided by the government.
 - Nail salon standards that owners must abide by.
 - Financial support in the way of rent subsidies; owners could reallocate this money toward safer products and tools/technologies.
 - Community partnerships involving nail salons, non-profit organizations and governments can work together in the provision of regular guidance on standards and expectations.
- Respondents' suggestions demonstrate the interest in making changes that minimize potential conflicts with their employers. Keeping their employment is their utmost priority.

Focus Groups Report

The project team hosted focus groups in three languages to further explore the interest and ideas for a healthy salon recognition program. Within the focus group, participants discussed issues of health and safety in the salon, and possible criteria for a healthy salon recognition program. The following is a summary of themes and issues from the focus group discussion:

Air ventilation

- Air circulation in salons is poor because nail salons are enclosed spaces. Most of the salons are small, with poor ventilation.
- One participant mentioned that she has more weariness working in a nail salon located inside a plaza because it is enclosed. Even with the door opened, the plaza air is not as good as those located on the street.
- Most salons don't have windows; only some have back doors. Those with both front and back doors can increase air circulation.
- It is generally known amongst technicians and owners that still air traps the smell, dust and other pollutants. One participant mentioned that she had a small fan at her workstation, but it doesn't help. If she turns it on to lessen the smell, the dust flies around.
- Air quality is worse during the wintertime because they cannot (are not allowed to) open the doors/windows. One participant mentioned that she doesn't want to work during the wintertime for this reason.
- The decision to open or close doors for ventilation is up to the salon owners.
- Their work shift is 8 to 10 hours in length, and these long hours leave them feeling uncomfortable (headaches, weariness)
- They are aware that their health could be negatively impacted in the long run.

Safer Nail Products

- The chemical smell from the nail products is strong and lingers for a long time, especially given the poor air circulation. Acetone and acrylic nail products are the worst.

- The chemicals from acrylic nail products cause teary eyes, flu-like symptoms, headaches and allergies. Once participant mentioned that she does not work in nail salons who offer this type of nail services.
- The chemicals and the impact on their health/body restrict how long they can stay in the business.
- One salon owner said it is not the owner's responsibilities to buy less toxic nail products. It is the government's responsibilities to enforce banning toxic chemicals effectively.

Working during the Pandemic

- There are many concerns about working during the pandemic because they are working closely with customers.
- Some chose not to work during this time because they have young children and elderly family at home.
- It is stressful working because they don't want to get COVID. One participant said that she was wearing 2 to 3 masks when working.
- Participants felt that they don't have control over their health and safety. Customers refusing masks were still permitted for services. Although there are health and safety guidelines from Public Health for them to follow, there is no security for their health.

Labour/Financial Issues

- Participants report a lack of income security. The majority of nail technicians are misclassified as independent workers. They won't be able to get a Record of Employment from the salon owners to apply for Employment Insurance.
- When technicians are sick, it's hard to take time off to see a doctor: "No work, no money".
- Participants talked about learning to ignore their health problems as part of this work.
- Long working hours during high seasons with no/little breaks. This is worse if the nail salon has one or two nail technician(s). They have no one to help them to lighten the load, such as cleaning the towels, sweeping the floor.
- Most commonly, technicians are paid by commission and may only get paid if they have customers. Despite working long shifts, they still may not make a living wage.
- There is competition among nail technicians in getting customers, e.g. if one technician's English is not good, another technician may take customers away from them.
 - More customers equal more money. It doesn't matter if all work the same number of hours.
 - Salon owners give more clients to experienced nail technicians.
- Salon owners also feel the financial stress as business has been hugely impacted during the pandemic.

Site Testing a Healthy Salon Recognition Program

The input from the interviews and focus groups were consistent. Based on this information, the project team created a possible list of what the healthy salon recognition program components could be and discussed with participants in the project. The components included⁴:

1. Adequate/additional ventilation

⁴ Although the individual interviews and past work in the sector indicate widespread labour issues within the sector, the project team focused on the health and safety aspect at the initial stage of exploration. We recognize the importance of including labour issues in a recognition program long term. We have learned to tread carefully about labour issues in the sector, taking our cues from the nail technicians and the close-knit nature of the workplaces.

2. Elimination of products that contain the toxic trio⁵
3. Safer work practices
4. Regular low- or no-cost training for nail technicians and salon owners
5. Consumer awareness initiatives

Onsite visits were planned and carried out to assess the feasibility of incorporating the proposed healthy salon recognition criteria. The team conducted ten onsite visits to salons in different areas of Toronto. All of them are rental properties and they were located in malls, street front and inside hair salons. Their sizes ranged from 150 to 1000 square feet. None of them had windows and only two had back doors. Most of the nail salons had 6 to 8 workstations (not including the pedicure work stations). The number of nail technicians working in each salon is half of what it was pre-pandemic. A site visit was set up between a member of the outreach team and owners. When visiting the site, the project team had a discussion with the owner about the proposed healthy salon recognition program and what it would be like to implement a program like this in their salon. For example, what are they already doing? What would they like to do? What are the opportunities and barriers to implementing these changes?

The following is a summary of the findings of the onsite salon visits and discussions:

Air Ventilation

- There is limited control over air ventilation. There are factors that salon owners can and cannot control to improve air quality. e.g. the nail salons located inside hair salons don't have control on when the system is on.
 - The majority reported their ventilation system running during salon hours; unclear about how effective the given systems are.
 - Six salons said they are not allowed to make any changes to the air ventilation.
 - Four salons were able to add additional ventilation (but hadn't).
- Almost half of the salon owners felt it is the responsibility of the property owners to change the filters. Only 4 salon owners reported changing the filters once or twice yearly.
- Closing garbage lids, using smaller size containers, keeping nail products closed tightly, and wearing masks are smaller scale improvements that are currently being implemented⁶.
- Nail salons inside plazas/malls tend to have their doors open most of the time throughout the year (although this is not fresh air coming in).
- Street-facing salons keep the doors closed to preserve heat during the winter. They may open them when the smell inside is getting strong. The cost of purchasing, installing and running additional ventilation (e.g. source-capture ventilation systems at workstations) is perceived as too large of a barrier. Financial support would be needed.
- Support in the installation logistics (procuring and installing) was also seen as a need.
- Noise from the additional ventilation was also a concern. The noise may affect communication and customers cannot hear the televisions. Some owners feel the ventilation needs should consider whether the salon does acrylic nails or not.

Eliminating Nail Products with Toxic Chemicals

- 9/10 owners know the negative health impacts from the toxic chemicals. Some have experienced symptoms, such as allergies, headaches, and stuffy nose. Some of them disappear whenever they leave the salons.

⁵ The toxic trio are the three most commonly used harmful chemicals found in common nail salon products: phthalates, toluene and formaldehyde. For more info see, "Toxic Trio" made by the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZqinwSzOTg>).

⁶ These activities are included in our training resource, "Reducing Risks to Respiratory Health, a resource for nail technicians". This and other resources can be found at www.pqwchc.ca/nails in the Resources section.

- All owners make the decisions about what products are purchased. Some take suggestions from customers to increase satisfaction and likelihood of return visits. They consider the price, how long it lasts, and customer feedback when choosing products. There is no consideration on toxic chemicals in the products.
- 8/10 owners did not know whether they have any less toxic nail products in their salons. They have little knowledge about less toxic brands and two mentioned the higher price.
- Two owners said that they use safer products; however, examples given demonstrated some confusion about what is safer or not. For example, “shellac” was named as a safer alternative, but shellac is a generic name for a type of polish and it contains the toxic trio.
- One owner reported a lot of time and money put toward using healthier products and is proud of her knowledge and efforts in this way.
- Lack of regulation and enforcement of toxic chemicals leaves little to no option for safer products.
- All salon owners were in support of government regulation and enforcement to reduce toxic chemicals in products.
- Their main concern is cost. Safer products tend to be more expensive. The extra cost will transfer to the customers “who would eventually complain”. Owners reported that if customers were asking for safer products, they are more likely to get them.

Safer Work Practices

- All salon owners reported to be cleaning and disinfecting in accordance with the guidelines from Toronto Public Health and Ministry of Labour. All had trained newly hired nail technicians on cleaning and disinfecting themselves or by the senior nail technicians. There is a huge increased emphasis on this during the pandemic.
- All salons generally use alcohol and bleach, without emphasis on safer products⁷. The focus is on following the Body Safe and Ministry of Labour guidelines.
- Issues with complying with the TPH and MoL guidelines were expressed:
 - There is no consistency of expectations among the inspectors. This causes confusion and stress.
 - Guidelines should be in different languages to ensure practices are done correctly.
 - Inspectors are not offering effective support in meeting guidelines.
- Desire for financial support to cover the increase in expenses for cleaning and disinfecting.
- Desire for more information on safer cleaning and disinfecting products because they are using them so much.
- Only three salons have a separate room for rest and meal break. Others (without separate rooms) eat and rest in the work area, increasing their ingestion of dust and pollutants.
- Only one owner reported training for new nail technicians to lower the impact of toxic chemicals.

Consumer Awareness Initiatives

Throughout the interviews, focus groups, and onsite visits, the role of customers emerged; for example, “good” customers versus “bad”, how customers treat technicians, and the power customers hold for demanding change. The inclusion of “consumer awareness initiatives” as part of the healthy salon recognition criteria reflects the power customers hold in these settings. It is understood that if customers become aware of their health and safety concerns and demand changes, owners will need to adapt. Salons, as part of a recognition program, could play a role in raising awareness of health issues within the salon through posters and information about safer practices being implemented.

⁷ NSWP has provided training and resources on reducing harmful exposures in cleaning and disinfecting practices. Our resource, “COVID-19 Safe Disinfecting Resource” can be found at www.pqwchc.ca/nails in the Resources section.

Analysis

The onsite visits gave the team a clearer picture of what the salon owners are doing in practice with respect to the proposed healthy salon recognition criteria. Some salons are doing some of the potential criteria already, such as cleaning and disinfecting. These are the areas over which they have the control. As for the installation of increased/adequate ventilation and using safer products, it is more complex because they involve a third party, such as landlords, government assistance and enforcement of government policies. Their main concern is about the cost, and the cost factor overrides health concerns. The pandemic has decreased their business and products are getting more expensive. They feel they cannot raise their prices because they would lose business. They believe their customers would elect to have fewer nail services or go to a nail salon with lower prices. The continued economic impact of the pandemic is making owners cut costs wherever they can.

The concept of a healthy salon recognition program is well received, however, their priority at this moment is to make a living. The initial interest in a program of this sort was articulated before the pandemic, and the enormous economic impact of the recent years has changed the landscape and current priorities.

The cost of making improvements to participate in a recognition program is the primary barrier. If there were subsidies provided to salons striving to meet the criteria, more salons would be willing and able to participate. The program in California that was the inspiration for the work here in Toronto, involved support from the State, including reimbursement for source capture ventilation systems to those salons that demonstrated commitment to meeting the healthy salon criteria.

Power Imbalance

The findings and the interactions with nail technicians and salon owners reinforced layers of power imbalance within and beyond the sector. Nail technicians tend to accept the workplace issues, and rarely challenge the salon owners. These issues ultimately affect their health and finance in negative ways. The technicians' precarious work status, sense of helplessness, and specific cultural and historical context prevents them from speaking up. They are hesitant to be vocal and active in pushing for change, because keeping their job is the top priority.

The discount nail salon sector in Toronto is mainly operated by immigrant women who have English as their second language. Many were nail technicians themselves. They learned to run the business from their former employers. Therefore, they tend to repeat the workplace issues. It is a challenge for people in the sector to understand regulations in English, and there are insufficiencies in the regulations, who they protect, and how they are created, communicated, and enforced. Systemic racism plays a part in marginalizing this sector with language and cultural barriers. As it stands, the decision to improve the working environment is in the hands of individual salon owners, who don't have control over the products available and what is in them, and don't have access to improving the infrastructure given the significant costs and limitations of their rental agreements.

Key Impacts of the Project

- Space to explore the concept of a healthy salon recognition program; responding to community interest and developing a clearer understanding of the opportunities and challenges it would offer
- Connection with community in a fractured time
- (Re)introducing opportunities for improvement in the sector; showcasing examples
- Assessing the state of the sector; better understanding of the current state and community needs
- Moments for education about health and safety, reducing harms in the workplace, labour rights, and clarifying levels of government and various regulations

Recommendations and Next Steps

- A healthy salon recognition program could be an important tool to ensure a healthy workplace for nail technicians without putting the onus on technicians to ensure their health and safety. The recognition program could evolve to include critical labour issues in the future.
- Now is not the right time to continue work on a healthy salon recognition program. Revisit the initiative when business has stabilized. Seeking government subsidy for supporting the adoption of the program would be a critical piece of the program. Questions remain about who would operationalize, enforce, and publicize the program.
- Immediate work could include advocating for stronger regulation and enforcement of toxic chemicals.
- Continue the engagement activities to rebuild the base of nail technicians in the wake of the pandemic disruptions to the sector.
- Continue leadership development opportunities among nail technicians to encourage active participation in the change process as well as taking the lead in new areas.
- Develop new strategies to find and engage the “underground” nail technicians.
- Build toward a public awareness campaign to nail technicians.

Challenges to the Project

- The unpredictable, ongoing pandemic had significant impact on our outreach as the sector changed: salons closed, technicians shifted jobs, and many went underground.
- Turnover within the project team created additional work and gaps in the connection to community. Two peer outreach workers found higher paying work opportunities. Outreach and relationships within the Vietnamese communities was significantly impacted.
- Significant change within our existing network of nail technicians. Many nail technicians have:
 - changed career,
 - not been called back to work,
 - stayed at home because they don't feel comfortable in salons due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and
 - become independent workers who operate from their own home or provide nail services at customers' homes.
- The individual interviews and focus groups were done over the phone and through virtual meetings. There were interruptions, missed non-verbal cues, and loss of focus/concentration. Face-to-face contact would be much better for collecting information.
- Facilitating and encouraging participants to voice their opinions was very difficult. They didn't want to be perceived as “troublemakers” since the specific cultural communities within this sector is small. Even when we called their names to speak, it would be short, echoing others' comments.

Budget at a Glance

For full budget report, please see spreadsheet attached as separate file.

Nail Salon Workers Project - Metcalf Foundation

2021/2022 Fiscal Year

REVENUES	Budget	Total	Bal. Left
Foundation	71,083.00	71,083.00	0.00
		0.00	0.00
Total:		71,083.00	0.00
EXPENSES			
Peers-15.5hrs p/w x \$18p/h x 50wks x 14.5%	16,104.00	17,746.25	-1,642.20
Community Health Worker \$1,885.20p/m	22,622.40	22,986.34	-363.94
Project Researcher	14,040.00	14,040.00	0.00
Translation Service	2,000.00	1,514.43	485.57
Focus Group Participation Honorarium	4,500.00	3,723.42	776.58
Test Site Honorarium	1,000.00	1,000.00	0.00
Cell Phone Partial Reimbursement	240.00	0.00	240.00
Peer Travel	1,296.79	792.75	504.04
Administration-15%	9,279.81	9,279.81	0.00
Total:	71,083.00	71,083.00	0.00
VARIANCE:		0.00	
YTD Revenues:	71,083.00		
YTD Expenses:	71,083.00		
YTD balance:	0.00		

Comments on the Budget (rationale behind changes greater than 15%)

- Peer and Community Health Worker hours are overspent because the project continued longer than planned; we reallocated other budget lines to account for this need.
- Under spent on participant honorarium because we changed from having three rounds of focus groups to two rounds. Participants expressed how hard it was to make the time for these engagement opportunities, so we modified the plan.
- Underspent on translation service because peers were able to translate more than we anticipated
- Underspent on travel expenses because we did more virtual than expected
- Underspent on cell phone reimbursement, because this was intended to go towards peers' costs in using their cell phones during in-person salon visits. Most of the engagement was done online and on the phone, so the peers did not incur these costs as planned.