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Symposium Transcript: Healthcare

Sepia Coleman

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LISA BRODOFF: Our next speaker is Sepia Coleman, who is from Memphis, Tennessee. She has been working in home care for approximately thirty years—five years as a certified nurse’s assistant. And she is also the mother of two adult daughters and two grandchildren, one whom is three years old, one of whom is sadly deceased, and one on the way. She currently works three part time jobs with no benefits and makes under \$15 an hour. She is an activist for social and economic justice and especially for Black and Brown women like herself. Welcome, Sepia.

SEPIA COLEMAN: Thank you so much for offering me the opportunity to be on your panel. It is very wonderful for you guys to select someone as myself. Also, sadly to add to that bio I’m a two- time COVID survivor by the grace of God. Just to share a little bit about what I have been encountering as a health care worker as we speak about worker conditions. As you know, I’m from Memphis, Tennessee, which is a right-to-work state, but our worker[s’] rights laws are, like, invisible.

At the time of the pandemic, no one—especially in the health care field—took us seriously. Everything was kind of hush-hush, kind of hidden where we were working with people that were infected and we basically knew something wasn’t right because of the amount of death that was happening in these nursing homes. We asked our supervisors or the people that were above us about testing, about getting us the proper PPE and things of that nature and they would all say “well, they’re giving it all to the hospitals. You have to wait your turn. As long as you have a mask on or you have gloves on, you’re protected.” That was not the answer that I was looking for.

And at that time, we already had gloves and the masks were not very reliable masks because we had to wear the same mask for eight hours, sometimes twelve, depending on the shift, and I know for a fact I deal with chronic allergies and if I would sneeze, my mask would get wet. So, I'm breathing back in what I put on my mask and then when I would take the mask off to eat lunch or to blow my nose or anything like that; that's exposure. And then we would go into our residents' rooms and say, for instance, they would be coughing or if they sneeze, it would get on our mask. So there again we're still being exposed to all type[s] of infection, meaning we did not know who had the virus and who did not because they told us that we were supposed to treat every resident and every person as though they would be treated. Meaning that they—I'm just going to be honest—they withheld information from us. I had no problem with working with someone that was positive. I have before, and I still continue to. But the thing of it is I just didn't feel like it should have been kept in secrecy because to me that was a form of deception.

As I was working at the nursing home, it was at the time of a pandemic. At the peak of the pandemic, around the last two weeks of April, I got really sick. And like I said, I deal with chronic allergies, so I assumed I was having another respiratory infection. A Memphis MLK50 journalist contacted me and wanted to speak with people that were working during the pandemic about their feelings on it. As I was at home recovering from what I thought was a respiratory infection, I did this article. Some way or another the article just kind of explained my feelings and how I was dealing with working during a pandemic in a health care setting, how nervous I was, how scared I was, and things of that nature.

I did not violate any social media policy, nor did I violate any ethical codes as far as naming any residents or putting my employer's name into the article. I also did not violate the HIPAA law at all. Well, as I came back to work, they tested us on May 1st and told us that we were negative. Now, mind you, like I say there was a lot of deception and a lot of secrecy. We

never saw our results. They just told us by word of mouth that we were negative. So, of course, I've been with them for about a year or so. Of course, you trust your employer. You trust your job. You trust the people that you work with. You wouldn't think they would put you in harm's way. Well, they found out about the article, and started a little friction. So, they demanded that I remove the article by contacting MLK. And if I didn't remove the article, then they would write me up or it would go into terms of termination. Well, I felt like my rights [were] being violated but because I work in a right-to-work state, they have a right to do what they want because workers' rights are invisible here in Tennessee.

So, they removed the article, and it didn't stop there. Come to find out we were tested on May the 1st and I never got my results back. And then prior to that testing, that whole month of April, a lot of the employees got sick. A lot of residents had passed away. Just to give an estimate, I'd say from beginning of January to May the 9th or the 8th I would say, I watched, literally watched, eighteen or so residents die. And so, I was like something's not right. This is not making sense. So, on May 1st they tested us. They did not give us our results. I went on and continued to work. I do three jobs. I do home health with a client who is paralyzed from a gunshot wound. So, he's paralyzed from the waist down, so I had to contact him and the agency that I worked for to let them know they were going to retest us again on May 11th. My company was like, "Hey, they just tested you. What's going on? Something is not right with us. Why are they testing you guys so much?" Of course, that sent up red flags. They contacted me May 11th and kept pressuring me about taking this test. So, I left my home health job and went to the facility and got tested but before I got tested, I asked them why you are testing us so much. I told them, me being who I am, if I find out that I am working with positive cases and that I have been positive or that I test positive, I'm going to expose you. Well, when I say expose them, I did not say on social media or how I was going to expose but them, but I did say I was going to expose them.

At the time when I spoke to them and told them what I was going to do, they tested me. After they tested me, I received a phone call on May 12th, and they stated that they were going to terminate me. They asked me did I have any questions and I said no. They said that they were terminating me for violation of social media policy. Well, then it goes all the way back to them terminating me because of the MLK article and it also goes back to me being an activist. They found out I was an activist. They found out that I had taken a trip to Washington in 2019 to introduce the Right to Raise the Minimum Wage bill in Washington. So, my rights were violated in all sectors. My rights were violated because I was not protected. Because I found out later that my May 1st test was positive. That was the first time that I tested positive. I was not being protected under any circumstances at the first job, the nursing home. I did not receive hazard pay nor any compensation or anything. That was the first nail in the coffin for me as far as health care.

I felt betrayed and very devastated because I had been there for a year or so and I couldn't believe they did that. So, after they terminated me, I took it as a great assault and continued to work but I said I was not going to work in the nursing home because the nursing home pandemic was just outrageous. It was just terrible.

I continued to work in geriatrics, and I started working for this place called Unity. I'm no longer employed at these places, so I don't care about saying their names. So, I worked at the geriatric psych. I enjoyed working my job. I truly did. I had benefits and everything. But I contracted COVID-19 again. Well, the second time I contracted it, I was hospitalized for fourteen days. Now, strangely, the way I contracted this was because of negligence of a nurse. It was not because of PPE. It was not because they did not tell us that the person had COVID because in our report we found out who has COVID and who does not. And I was assigned to the isolation hall, so I was aware that this person had COVID. So, I was to do my job and that's what I did, and I was fully covered in PPE with a mask, and she

would wear the gloves, the gown, the whole nine yards. Well, how I caught COVID is that the lady who had COVID did not do what she needed to do. When I say she did not do what she needed to do, I mean that she did not stay in her room. This is geriatric psych unit, so I am trained and certified to do CPR, not physical restraints, but ways to keep people in a safe position and keep them in a safe area. So, as I was doing my job and doing my rounds, this particular person came out of her room, and she did not have her mask on. I alerted the nurse at the nurses' station to let the nurse know what we needed to do to try to get this person back into their room, their safe area.

As I was trying to do that, the nurse said to me, "Oh, stop it. Stop it. We're all going to get it. What do you want me to do? Just go on. There's nothing I can do about it. Just let her do whatever she wants to do." At that time, she had already gone into the room with the regular population, the other population of people who are not in isolation. So, by her being in that room with those people who are not in isolation, she has exposed everyone that is in that room.

So, me being protective with all my PPE, I was like "I'm sure I'm not going to get it." Well, what happened was the next day or when I came back to work, the whole building was infected because of this one person. The virus was transferred from person to person, so all thirty-five staff members were infected. From those thirty-five staff members, eight residents got infected, and eight residents died. When those residents first came in, they were able to care for themselves. Some of them could and some couldn't, but they were in a better shape when they first came in from when the lady had spread the virus.

In the process of that, all my coworkers started having headaches, we started getting sick, and we developed fevers. So, we're not sure what it was because this was around July. July is kind of seasonal for allergies, so nobody knew what it was. Well, we did not necessarily take it very seriously because these were geriatric patients and some of these residents

were in their sixties, seventies, and eighties and had a lot of health problems. We didn't look at it as that's what would happen. So, they started to test all the staff and residents because it just seemed like we were getting more COVID-19 residents in our facility.

On June 12th or 13th, I was tested. I received my results on June 18th. Now, this is the problem that I have about the working conditions. If you test me on a Monday and I continue to work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, look how many people I have infected even though I don't know my results, look how many people I have infected. So, what I kept asking my first employer and my second employer, why are we not following the CDC guidelines; when we're tested, we're supposed to remain in quarantine. They'd respond with, "Oh, no, there's nothing going on. You're not going to catch anything. We're all negative here." I kept hearing this from my home care job, the nursing home job, and the job with the geriatric site. No one wanted to follow the guidelines and they would get angry and look at it as how do you dare tell us how to run our job or how dare you correct or challenge us on what we should be doing right for you guys. I was livid.

As I said, I was tested on the 13th and found out on Saturday the 18th that I was positive. And what's devastating about that is that I normally get my grandson on Fridays, and I had him but something about my body just wasn't feeling right. I just didn't feel right. So, I kept my mask on the whole time I was around him. When I received the news on Saturday, I had to drop him off and I was devastated because I have a three-year-old grandson that I might have infected. In the process of me trying to get myself together, I was very upset and angry and mad at myself because I trusted a health care system which I should know better because, hey, we have no benefits, they never cared about us, so why should this be a shock. Well, the shock was that I did not do what I needed to do for myself. I felt like I had let myself down, and I just was devastated.

In the process of me going through that, I was hospitalized for 14 days and when I say I had never experienced anything like that in my life, I have never. It felt like an extraterrestrial had taken over my body. And then in the process of going through the hospital, being in the hospital, I was not compensated at all. When I was released, I had to come home with assisted aids, meaning I had to learn how to use a bedside potty and shower chair. All the aids I used to help people in my work for thirty-something years, I had to do that for myself. Sorry to get emotional but I had to do this all by myself. I had no one. I was alone. And the process of going through that was hard, but by the grace of God I had wonderful people to raise money for me with a GoFundMe and my voice was still out there. I was still an activist on the frontline and doing what I needed to do but it kept me from doing what I love to do and that was to take care of people. And I still have effects from it. I still have headaches and I get tired very easily and it's very hard for me to do the work that I love to do.

But my thing of it is that people don't think it is as serious as it is, but it is a very serious situation and until we get workers' rights that protect minorities, especially Black and Brown women, we're going to still have this pandemic and it's not going to get any better. And a mask and gloves are not PPE. PPE is a gown, gloves, mask, shield, and covering of your shoes. That is PPE. That is what I learned in CNA school, but in the State of Tennessee, we are not getting that. We're still not getting PPE. All they give us is a mask and gloves.

Thank you so much for allowing me to share my story and I hope that this panel understands and forgives me for being emotional and choked up, but that was a very big learning experience for me and I'm sure it was a big learning experience for everyone else. Thank you.

LISA BRODOFF: Sepia, thank you so much for your story, your honesty, and sharing with us what the reality is of the legal issues we're dealing with, of the remedies we're trying to get, and what it's really like for

workers like you who are caring for people with COVID, while suffering yourself.