Irresponsible Industrial Laundries: A Major Public Health Threat

A report from NYC Council Member, Ritchie Torres and CLEAN NYC
Every day over 5,000 people go to work in industrial laundries in and around New York City. These laundries wash, dry, and deliver linens and textiles that are used by millions of New York City residents and visitors every year: restaurant napkins, hotel sheets, patient gowns, work uniforms, and more. And while many of these linens and textiles are used in high-end establishments in Manhattan, they are most likely washed in the Bronx, Queens, or the suburbs. A far cry from your corner laundromat, the largest industrial laundries resemble factories and process more than 10 million pounds of laundry per year.¹

Working conditions in industrial laundries can be difficult and dangerous. Workers are exposed to extreme heat, loud noise, harsh cleaning chemicals, and potentially life-threatening machines. Combined with low pay and few benefits which are the norm for non-union industrial laundries, many of these facilities pose serious risks to workers as well.

This report examines the current state of more than 50 industrial laundries in the New York City area: how they operate, what they do, who works in them, and the significant risks that the irresponsible industrial laundries among them pose to the public health of New Yorkers every day.

It brings together the latest evidence, analysis, and worker testimonials from an industry that is rarely scrutinized and often operates in the shadows, far outside the gaze of government watchdogs.

The soiled products that enter industrial laundries for cleaning can be far dirtier than household laundry. At local facilities that process linens and textiles, it is not uncommon for dirty laundry to contain hazardous waste and contaminants. And even though these linens are used by countless New Yorkers in establishments like hospitals, restaurants, and hotels, there is currently no regulation of industrial laundries to ensure that they provide safe, clean linens to New Yorkers.

The report shows that regulation is desperately needed to safeguard the health of the people who eat at New York restaurants, stay in its hotels, or seek care in its medical facilities. No oversight coupled with attempts by operators to cut costs can directly impact the cleanliness of their finished products. It’s not just a question of having a stain on the sheet in a hotel either; in cases where unclean linens are used in a healthcare setting, the result can be a life-threatening infection.²

Many players in the industry have chosen not to compete solely on price, but take pride in offering high quality products and treating their workers well. Voluntary certifications, such as those offered by the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC) and the Textile Rental Services Association (TRSA) require providers to follow scientifically-based industry best practices covering topics including facility design, equipment maintenance, and the laundry process.³

Additionally, many laundry workers in and around the city are represented by labor unions which have negotiated better wages and working conditions, thereby offering protection to workers to do the right thing and ensure that “clean” products really are clean. But with the health of city residents and the reputations of some of the city’s most prominent industries on the line, we can’t rely on voluntary standards.

The report concludes with an account of how the CLEAN Act, legislation currently pending before the New York City Council, would extend the much-needed licensing and regulation to cover industrial laundries and laundry delivery while establishing minimum standards of cleanliness. In this way, simple, commonsense licensing and regulation can ensure that all industrial laundries follow the same best practices. Transforming irresponsible industrial laundries into responsible businesses will benefit all of us.
SECTION 1: Uneven Standards and Risks to Public Health

Clean linen and garments in our restaurants, hotels and hospitals is what the public expects, but there are no local, state or federal laws requiring clean linen to be delivered to the public. Industry groups have recognized this problem and have created voluntary, self-monitoring standards for laundry delivered in healthcare, hospitality and food service industries. However, those are voluntary standards that many laundries choose to disregard. Some laundries wash both restaurant or hospitality linen in the same facility as health care laundry is washed, which means a restaurant napkin may be processed using the same equipment as used for soiled medical office linen. Since there is no mandatory oversight or standards, there is no way to know how the linens and garments used by the public daily are being washed and processed.

Getting soiled linens clean is a complicated process. In order to prevent contamination of clean fabrics, proper procedures for cleaning and handling laundry must be followed. In a healthcare setting, ensuring that linen is clean and sanitary takes on even greater importance. Multiple studies have confirmed that contaminated linens can transmit disease. While some leaders in the industry have taken steps to document best practices to prevent contamination, many laundries do not follow those practices, and a lack of regulation places the general public at risk.

The process of collecting, cleaning, and delivering laundry has many steps, and a healthcare laundry’s failure to follow the proper procedures at any of them can lead to a final product that is contaminated, rather than clean. Medical literature details “four basic interconnected factors” that must be optimized in order to ensure a clean final product: duration, mechanical action, chemicals, and temperature. Changes to any of these factors without adjusting the others can have negative effects.\(^{\text{iv}}\) The amount of water used in the wash has also been shown to impact laundry cleanliness.\(^{\text{v}}\) All of these different factors can be affected by the types of cost-cutting measures found in irresponsible laundries.\(^{\text{vi}}\) Moreover, once clean, laundry must be handled, transported, and stored using methods that ensure cleanliness.\(^{\text{vii}}\) Failure to follow these important procedures opens the door to contamination, possible spread of disease, and potentially serious health consequences.

Numerous studies and investigations have documented serious illnesses carried in laundered healthcare linens believed to be clean, including:

- Bacillus cereus meningitis in two patients was traced to linen; it was found that the bacteria was not being killed by the wash process.\(^{\text{viii}}\)
- Recurring Streptococcus pyogenes outbreak among newborns in a maternal unit was traced to infant vests being dried in a contaminated drier.\(^{\text{x}}\)
- An Aspergillus flavus outbreak was traced to linen after it was found that the delivery truck did not have a proper back door, allowing contamination by dust from road construction.\(^{\text{x}}\)
- A Mucormycosis outbreak at Children’s Hospital of New Orleans in which five children died was traced by investigators to linen which was likely contaminated at the laundry facility or in the delivery process.\(^{\text{xi}}\)

Given the potential for harm to the public, high standards in the processing and handling of laundry are crucial. And while no city, state, or federal agency currently regulates industrial laundries in the New York area to ensure quality, industry leaders have attempted to fill this gap with a patchwork of
voluntary certifications. The standards set for HLAC and TRSA certifications draw heavily from evidence-based healthcare regulations. These standards cover a variety of topics including plant design, equipment operation, plant maintenance and cleaning, occupational safety standards, and the actual process for washing, storing, and transporting linens. The TRSA certification additionally requires that laundries submit clean products for analysis by an independent lab.

Unfortunately, not all laundries adhere to these voluntary standards. In fact, only five laundries out of more than 50 in the New York area are certified under these programs.\textsuperscript{xii} With no clear oversight over the vast majority of laundries operating in and delivering to the city, there is no way of knowing if proper precautions are being taken at any particular laundry. The experiences of workers, however, can offer a glimpse at the poor conditions in some of these irresponsible New York-area laundries.

“I worked for six years at [a laundry] that laundered for hospitals and nursing homes in New York City and Long Island. Where I currently work, they have a system where they wash and sanitize the bins that bring dirty laundry so they can use them for clean linens. At [the laundry I used to work at] this was rarely done. The common thing was to empty the bins of dirty linen and then they put in a bag of clean product to be sent to the customer. When dirty linen bins arrived at [the plant] with excrement or blood, they were wiped out with a towel, that’s all.”

—José O. Umara
SECTION 2: Low Standards for Workers Affect Public Health

Working in an industrial laundry is not easy. The workforce of over 5,000 workers, mostly made up of women, immigrants, people of color, and other vulnerable populations work in hot, loud, and sometimes dangerous conditions. Without the protections of a union, these workers can make little more than minimum wage. Many workers report facing wage theft and other abuses.

Unable to negotiate over working conditions, non-union laundry workers are expected to maintain a breakneck pace. In a dangerous environment, high production demands can translate into very real dangers for workers. Bodily fluids, medical instruments, and even needles can find their way into the soiled laundry at hospitals and pose a real hazard to workers who must sort it prior to washing, especially when they are not given proper protective equipment. Heavy machinery always poses a risk of injury or death, a risk which is amplified when proper procedures are not followed or safety mechanisms are inoperable.

The consequences for workers can be dire: 7,000 worker injuries were officially reported in 2013, and several laundry workers die on the job every year. In 2011, a worker was crushed to death in a Long Island laundry. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration found the laundry to be in serious violation of five different machine safety standards.

Worker stories also reveal that the most unscrupulous industrial laundry operators show little care for their customers and the end users of their laundered products. Workers at these irresponsible laundries have reported that their companies are perfectly willing take various shortcuts which compromise laundry cleanliness.

For example, industrial laundry workers in and around New York City, reported that they have had to send out to consumers odorous laundry and that a laundry routinely failed to sanitize bins that held dirty laundry before loading them with clean laundry. These practices lead to a less than hygienically clean final product. Without sufficient oversight to ensure proper procedures are followed, irresponsible laundry operators put both workers and the public at risk. Given the dangers that contaminated laundry poses to New Yorkers, greater oversight and uniform standards of cleanliness are needed.

“In one laundry where I worked] I don’t know if it’s because the sheets were washed incorrectly, but they would come out with a foul odor, a moldy smell, and we had to send them out like that, so that the work wouldn’t slow down. Because they didn’t like us to slow down the work. Once we had a problem in the area where I worked. The machine wasn’t working, the washer, and the product, the sheets, we had to send them back through the ironer and they went out like that. They didn’t wash the sheets. They went out like that, ironed, nothing more.”

—Maritza Córdoba
SECTION 3: How City Regulation Protects Public Health

New York City’s Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) is perfectly situated to provide the oversight and regulation that the industrial laundry industry so desperately needs. DCA is tasked with regulating and licensing various industries for the purposes of protecting the public from “deceptive, unfair and unconscionable practices”, maintaining “standards of integrity, honesty and fair dealing” and protecting “the health and safety of the people of New York city”.

To accomplish this mission, DCA currently regulates dozens of different types of businesses including cigarette vendors, tow truck operators, pedicabs, and even some laundries. DCA regulations of these various industries are meant to ensure that businesses are both transparent about rates and that they provide services in ways that are not harmful to the public.

Currently, DCA licenses and regulates laundromats and dry cleaners that serve the general public, as well as independent contractors that collect or deliver goods for those laundries. DCA’s regulations ensure that laundries deal fairly with their customers, and that laundry operations do not pose a hazard or nuisance to other building occupants or neighbors.

Unfortunately, the current law does not extend to large industrial laundries that launder for delivery to businesses rather than to the general public, nor does it ensure that these laundries develop a sanitary and safe final product for hospitals, hotels, and restaurants. But, the existing law and regulations provide a clear precedent and platform for constructing commonsense regulations that ensure best practices are followed and workers and public health are protected.
SECTION 4: Pragmatic Legislation Builds on Existing Regulation

Because of these risks to public health, NYC Council Member Ritchie Torres together with co-sponsors, introduced the CLEAN Act in February to close the loophole that allows irresponsible industrial laundries to operate in the dark and jeopardize public health. The CLEAN Act would expand the city’s current laundry licensing program to cover industrial laundries that clean fabrics for businesses such as hotels, restaurants, hospitals, and doctors’ offices. It would also require a license for delivery of laundry within the city. Most importantly, the legislation would allow DCA to implement mandatory procedures to ensure minimum standards of cleanliness for laundered fabrics and laundry delivered in New York.

Once regulations are in place, all industrial laundries that operate in and deliver to the city will follow the same practices and procedures, creating a level playing field that removes the current incentives to cut corners and labor costs at the expense of public health. To enforce compliance, DCA will conduct unannounced inspections prior to issuing or renewing any license to a laundry or laundry delivery truck.

Because so many industrial laundries serving New York City businesses are based outside the five boroughs, the CLEAN Act will regulate both facilities and delivery trucks so that cleanliness standards are followed throughout the processing and transporting of linens and textiles. DCA will not only inspect trucks prior to issuing or renewing a delivery license, but will also ensure that delivery drivers are taking the necessary precautions to ensure that they are moving a clean, safe product.
CONCLUSION: Cleanliness and Industrial Laundries of the Future

With all of the risks that contaminated linens and textiles pose, there is no excuse for continuing to allow irresponsible industrial laundries to operate unlicensed and unregulated in New York City. Passage of the CLEAN Act will bring irresponsible industrial laundries into the light and ensure that they all meet the same standards of cleanliness. This is the best way for city government to ensure that the linens and textiles used by New Yorkers at local hospitals, hotels, and restaurants are clean and safe.
Endnotes

4 For example: increasing the size of the load to increase production speed, reducing the temperature to save energy costs, reducing the amount of water or detergent to save on associated costs, etc.
5 http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/prevent/laundry.html
13 Jennings 354-355.
19 6 RCNY § 2-131
20 2015 Bill No 697.