


A Movement for Safer Nail Salons

Advocates are pushing nail salons to use safer products and for more transparency about the chemicals within them.

By Gaby Galvin Staff Writer Aug. 15, 2018, at 9:54 a.m.



There are about 440,000 nail technicians in the U.S.  (GETTY IMAGES)

SITUATED IN DOWNTOWN [Berkeley, California](#), Fashion Nails looks like any other nail salon, with magazines stacked for waiting customers and rows of polishes lining the wall.

But the small business hasn't smelled of the harsh chemicals long associated with nail salons in years, since around the time owner Mai Dang noticed one of her two employees had constant itchy skin, watery eyes and coughing bouts while at work.



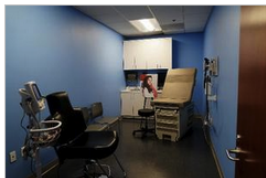
Worried about the health of her employees and her young children, who spent a considerable amount of time at the salon, Dang brought in a ventilator that sucks up toxic fumes and swapped out her standard nail polishes for products made from less-harsh ingredients.

"I wanted people to be healthy – my customers, myself, my children," Dang says, speaking in Vietnamese through a translator. "People want to come to the shop and not be exposed to harsh chemicals."

Fashion Nails is one of more than 200 nail salons – most in the Bay Area but some also in states like [Massachusetts](#) and [Washington](#) – that have changed their practices as a result of advocacy for healthier working conditions and greater transparency regarding what goes into products used daily by the nation's nearly [440,000](#) nail technicians.

In Northern California, that advocacy began in force around 2005, when a worker with Asian Health Services, a community health center in Oakland, noticed many of the Vietnamese nail salon employees she met while doing outreach on diabetes control had similar health issues. Julia Liou, now a chief deputy at the clinic, says her team "started putting two and two together" about the potential health effects of some nail products, and formed the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative in 2010 to be the state's chief advocacy group for the nail salon workforce.

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"This is a vision for a very first step in protecting the public health of both those workers and consumers overall," Liou says. "Ultimately, manufacturers do need to consider safer reformulations without substitutes that are just as harmful. ... This is an issue that was previously swept under the rug and not looked at as a public health issue."

A survey published in 2008 of 74 beauty shops offering nail services and 201 workers in Alameda County, California, found that a third of the shops had minimal pathways for ventilation and around half did not use local exhaust ventilation, which can help reduce chemical exposure. Four in 5 workers reported having health concerns related to their jobs, and about half said they experienced symptoms such as breathing problems, numbness and irritated skin.

Nail polishes, glues, removers and other salon products may contain chemicals – including the so-called toxic trio of dibutyl phthalate, toluene and formaldehyde – that can irritate a person's skin, throat and eyes and are suspected of causing more serious complications like cancer and reproductive issues, though research about their effects is limited.

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"When we actually reached out to these (product) manufacturers, they said, 'Oh, it's a tiny minuscule amount,'" Liou says. "But when you think about it, the workers are handling these products eight to 10 hours a day and working like six days a week. They are essentially canaries in the coal mine and have been experiencing this cumulative impact based on these chemicals."

In California alone, there were roughly 100,900 nail technicians working in about 7,900 salons last year, according to industry publication [Nails Magazine](#). More than half of nail salon workers nationwide are Vietnamese, and the majority are women of reproductive age, according to the magazine.

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Many nail salon employees enter the field because it doesn't require strong English language skills, which Liou says can make it harder for them to learn about the health risks associated with their jobs and easier for employers to take advantage of them.

The average annual wage for manicurists and pedicurists in California was \$25,060 in May 2017, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) – just below the [federal poverty threshold](#) of \$25,100 for a family of four this year. Nationwide, nail salon employees earned an average of \$357.84 per week in April, down from \$386.16 a year ago, BLS data show.

"When you look at the nail salon workforce, no one had paid attention to them. They're mostly low-income, immigrant women," Liou says. "At the same time we realized – diving even further and looking at the policies in place – there was nothing protective of this workforce at all. ... People were asking, 'I'm pregnant, should I still continue to work, and what can I do?'"



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Liou and her colleagues at Asian Health Services founded the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative to incentivize salons to use safer products and practices and to advocate for regulatory policies, working with local governments, public health groups and the Environmental Protection Agency, among other partners. Since last year, the collaborative has allocated more than \$82,000 in loan funding for 17 salons to help them pay for ventilation systems, "three-free" nail polishes and products, and to meet other requirements for cities and counties to recognize the salons as healthy.

The collaborative helped secure funding for Dang's \$1,000 ventilator. And while she pays about \$2 to \$3 more per bottle to buy special nail polish, she says the added cost has been worth it because her employee's health is better and her designation as a healthy nail salon draws in more health-conscious customers.

"The customers' happiness is good for business," Dang says. "My worker's asthma problems are much less frequent and my kids like to come in more. They said it smelled before."

Liou says she regularly fields calls from advocates across the country who are interested in bringing similar initiatives to their own cities and states, and programs already are underway in [Boston](#), [Minneapolis](#), [Seattle](#) and [Toronto](#).

In Boston, the [Green & Clean](#) program recognizes auto shops, nail salons and hair salons that participate in health and safety training and work to reduce chemical exposure, among other [requirements](#) designed to protect the health of employees and the environment. Paul Shoemaker, director of the Boston Public Health Commission's Environmental and Occupational Health Division, which runs the program, says about two dozen of the city's 210 nail salons have been certified through the program, which requires an annual renewal and recognizes businesses in different tiers referred to as "leaves."

Businesses are enlisted in the initiative through three full-time outreach workers, two of whom are Vietnamese-speaking women, Shoemaker says. The majority of Boston's nail salons are run by Vietnamese women, so those outreach workers have built trust and rapport with business owners that have proved key to the program's success, he says.

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