

# Reporters press for sick leave, protective gear during pandemic

A Chicago Tribune reporter who is sick at home with Covid-19 symptoms said the newspaper is trying to make her take limited paid time off instead of sick leave to recover and did not give her access to personal protective gear in the weeks before she became ill.

In a series of Tweets starting April 1, Jessica Villagomez, a Tribune reporter who has been with the company about one year, said that she started showing Covid-19 symptoms around March 30. The 24-year-old eventually went to a clinic for an EKG and chest X-ray, which came back normal. She was not tested for Covid-19.

“Dr. told me I likely have Covid-19 but not to count on being tested since I am young and otherwise have mild symptoms. I was sent home to rest and quarantine for two weeks. I could not breathe,” Villagomez wrote in an [April 1 Tweet](#). “It feels like my entire body has been put through a blender,” she [added](#).

*I can't imagine the amount of positive cases of COVID-19 out there right now that can't even be diagnosed. What if you don't have insurance, money, language skills? I am considered mild and unconfirmed yet it feels like my entire body has been put through a blender.*

– Jessica Villagomez (@JessicaVillag) [April 1, 2020](#)

The next day, Villagomez tweeted that a representative from the Tribune's human resources department [told her](#) she could apply for short-term disability after using five days of paid

time off. "All I want are sick days," she tweeted, tagging the company. "Possibly having Covid-19 is not a vacation."

The Tribune's new editor-in-chief Colin McMahon did not respond to repeated phone messages and emails. McMahon was promoted to the paper's top job on Feb. 27 in a management shake-up. Bruce Dold and former managing editor Peter Kendall were laid off. Current managing editor Christine Taylor did not respond to email requests for comment.

"Tribune Publishing's executive team is constantly reviewing the course of Covid-19; our efforts to obtain and provide personal protective equipment to our reporters, photographers, and others who need it; and our benefits policies that may be drawn upon for those who contract the illness," Tribune Publishing spokesman Max Reinsdorf said in an email.

Megan Crepeau, a Chicago Tribune reporter and head of the Chicago Tribune Guild, said Villagomez should receive unlimited paid time off while she is sick.

"This is not just about Jessica. She's the only one that has gone public about this, for all I know there are plenty of people who are in her same boat or inevitably will be in the same boat," Crepeau said. "All we're asking is for a leave policy from Tribune Publishing that is humane and respects the risks that their people are taking on behalf of the newsroom, on behalf of the readers, on behalf of, and let's not forget, the corporate shareholders. If you are an hourly employee who goes out to cover a pandemic and you get sick, you are effectively penalized. That's the way we view this."

*Jessica was often sent out to cover coronavirus stories without PPE.*

*Now she's sick. And Tribune policy won't give her extra paid time to recover. She's burning through her own PTO.*

Attn [@tribpub](#) [@colinjmcmahon](#) [@chrissywtaylor](#) and Par Ridder:

*this needs to be fixed ASAP* <https://t.co/83nMvnIoub>

– Megan Crepeau (@crepeau) [April 2, 2020](#)

Crepeau added that the union, formed just two years ago, doesn't have a contract agreement with the Tribune but has been bargaining over policies related to coronavirus.

"The sick leave thing is one of the most pressing things we're negotiating over," Crepeau said, calling it "an issue of basic fairness."

Although many newsrooms are allowing or even ordering their employees to work from home, some journalists are being asked to go into the communities they cover to report, including [photographers](#) and videographers. Some, like Villagomez, [are getting sick](#).

Before she got sick, Villagomez, a general assignment for the Tribune, had been out reporting on a top Chicago hospital's [preparations for an influx of coronavirus patients](#) and [how Chicagoans planned to spend their coronavirus stimulus money](#). Chicago Public Schools closed March 17, the same day Illinois held its primary election. The city of Chicago and the Illinois governor [issued a state-at-home order](#) that began March 21.

Villagomez was not wearing protective gear because the Tribune did not start providing masks until March 25. Villagomez declined a request by email for an interview. "I'd like to respectfully decline any interview or anything like that," she replied. "I'm incredibly weak."

On March 27, a group of 100 Tribune staff members from around the country took part in a live-streamed class about how to properly use the masks. Along with the Chicago Tribune, Tribune Publishing owns the The Baltimore Sun, the New York Daily News, Orlando Sentinel, Hartford Courant, South

Florida's Sun-Sentinel and additional titles in Pennsylvania and Virginia. Villagomez was not part of the training, according to the union.

Jerry Glozer, the Tribune's corporate environmental health and safety manager who led the training, said it was offered to staffers deemed to be "high risk, meaning the workforce who can't work from home like your reporters and photo journalists who go into high risk areas." Most staffers are working from home, he added.

Glozer said that he will be training more employees in the coming days and that the Tribune has N95 masks in the newsroom and also has shipped them to any journalists working from home who want one.

The Chicago Sun-Times, the Tribune's rival in Chicago, first tested having some employees work from home on March 11 and ran an [editorial](#) about the test on March 12.

"All but a handful of support staff worked from home that day," said Chris Fusco, editor-in-chief. "Our IT department worked with employees to help them bring desktop computer equipment to their houses if they didn't have laptops. I believe we were among the first newspapers in the country to do this."

On March 16, the Sun-Times emailed employees tips for staying safe and responded to questions from the Sun-Times Guild, which [ratified its contract](#) with the company earlier in the month. In response to a question about how employees would be paid if they got sick, the paper said any absences would be handled in its typical fashion, which requires employees first use paid time off and then, if needed, short-term disability and the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Additionally, the question of opting out of work assignments at high-risk locations without discipline was brought up, and the company responded by saying "Whenever possible,

assignments are being handled remotely. We cannot, however, issue a blanket opt-out order given existing staffing levels. When reporters go out into the field, we are advising them to abide by the CDC guidelines on social distancing.”

The Sun-Times had a company-wide conference call on March 31 with Fusco and interim chief executive Nykia Wright. The two shared that the Sun-Times was in the process of trying to acquire more protective gear. Only three employees asked for face masks when they were first offered, Fusco said.

Several reporters told GJR that protective gear was offered April 5.

The US is facing a shortage of personal protective gear. Companies that didn't already have them on hand are now competing for a limited supply that is being directed where it is most needed, to first-responders and healthcare workers. The Sun-Times [recently reported](#) about a countywide program in Chicago and the surrounding area to collect masks and shields for these workers.

Patricia Gallagher Newberry, president of the Society of Professional Journalists, said news organizations should ensure their workers are safe but acknowledged it may be hard to provide protective gear.

“We know there's a shortage of these supplies across the country for health workers and all kinds of folks. But yes, news organizations have the obligation to protect their journalists to the extent that they can. Yes, that's equipment. Yes, that's education,” Gallagher Newberry said.

Now that the [CDC officially has recommended](#) that Americans wear cloth protective masks while in public, any editor who sends a reporter out should provide the gear, said Robert Mahoney, deputy executive director of The Committee to Protect Journalists.

“The most important thing that any reporter or assignment editor can do is, before we get to personal protective equipment or first-aid training, is to do a proper risk assessment,” he said. “It’s the first step that a lot of people skip and it’s the most important. To assess the risk of going to a particular place at a particular time to get a story. Is there something else? How dangerous is it? Do you have the right training, skill level, experience and equipment to do that? Is there some other way of getting the story without exposing yourself to that kind of danger? This is the basic thing that reporters and editors need to have.”

Mahoney said it’s important “not to be reckless.”

“Make sure you take the right precautions. After all, we are also citizens as well as journalists. We have a duty to look after ourselves because we are surrounded by the story. It’s not like you’re sending somebody to a war zone or a protest. This is all around us, and you don’t know when you’re exposed.”

Crepeau said some Tribune reporters already have spoken up about feeling uneasy about taking certain assignments. The union is pushing for assurances from the Tribune that reporters will not be punished for declining assignments that they deem too dangerous in the current environment, she added.

“Throughout all of this, we still have not heard one consistent top-down newsroom-wide message saying ‘We will not discipline you for declining an assignment on safety grounds. We will not make you do anything you’re uncomfortable with,’ “ she said.

*Bob Chiarito is a Chicago-based freelancer who has written for the Chicago Tribune. He is currently covering the coronavirus pandemic for The New York Times, Block Club Chicago and Agence France-Presse.*