



# Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York Connects Tobacco Control with Safe Working Environments

## Site Profile

The Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York was initially formed to help find employment for the surviving workers of Windows on the World, the restaurant that had been at the top of the World Trade Center, which was destroyed on September 11, 2001.

In the ensuing years, the center expanded its scope, helping workers find jobs, but also organizing them to fight for safe working environments and equitable wages.

An organization serving mostly immigrant restaurant workers may seem an unlikely ally in tobacco control. But the Restaurant Opportunities Center founders—Fekkak Mamdouh, who had been a waiter at Windows on the World, and Saru Jayaraman, an immigration attorney—saw a connection to their efforts to combat hazardous working conditions.

An immigrant from Morocco, Mamdouh had worked in restaurants for some 20 years and recalled how he and other workers suffered in the days when smoke hung thick in the air of New York City's taverns and eating establishments.

"People are having a good time and smoking," he said. "And you breathe it and you can't say anything because you are a poor worker.... I couldn't change it, because I would be fired."

Restaurant Opportunities Center became a [PATH](#) grantee in 2003 and planned to push for stronger enforcement of New York State's Clean Indoor Air Act, which had banned smoking in most indoor public spaces that year. The organization's Worker Leadership Board raised more than \$4000 in matching funds through raffles, membership dues, direct appeals and events and received in-kind services from a number of organizations such as the NYC Coalition for a Smoke-Free City and H.E.R.E. Local 100. The center also received grants from the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the National Institute on Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for a new health and safety project. The presence of unrestricted matching funds enabled it to pay for some activities, such as

lobbying, that could not be supported with its Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) grant.

Center staff initially advocated for new, local legislation that would allow New York City to revoke the operating licenses of restaurants that defied the ban and permitted smoking in their establishments.

The [NYC Coalition for a Smoke-Free City](#) feared that such legislation would provoke an uproar among restaurant owners. After its annual survey of restaurant workers found that the existing legislation was largely being enforced, the Restaurant Opportunities Center agreed to shift its emphasis, and to mobilize restaurant workers to testify at various events to prevent any weakening of the state's Clean Indoor Air Act.

On the one-year anniversary of the Act's passage, Jayaraman, Mamdouh and several other members of the Restaurant Opportunities Center attended a hearing before the New York City Public Health Commission. The room was full of restaurant owners, vigorously arguing that the smoking ban was hurting their businesses and that it should be weakened or, better yet, rescinded. (A [New York state report](#) later found that the smoking ban had little effect on restaurants' bottom line.)

Mamdouh says he was intimidated at first when he got up to speak. "But that feeling goes when you are doing what is right," he says. "Why do you want to kill people so you can make money? That's how I was looking at it."

Jayaraman says the experience of testifying left a strong impression with the restaurant workers. "They were all terrified going in, but so invigorated leaving," she says. "They found that the Department of Health listened to them even more because they were such a minority...I don't think they ever expected to be heard, and they were."

Jayaraman believes the Restaurant Opportunities Center's maiden voyage into tobacco advocacy delivers a strong message for the tobacco-control field. "I didn't know much about the issue before," she admits. "In some ways, there is such a separation between anti-tobacco advocates and the world of workers.

"I feel it is so critical that people starting a campaign like this in a locality start with workers. Begin by talking with workers. Don't end there."