

COVID-19 and its negative impact on Ontario barbers and hairstylists



June 2, 2020

By Michael RileyLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter

While many businesses have been hit hard by COVID-19, none have been more financially challenged than those deemed non-essential by the provincial government. Barbers and hairstylists in Ontario fall into this category and have had to shutter their doors to their clientele on government orders since March 23.

Nearly 40 per cent of hairstylists and barbers across the province are self-employed. Many in this group rent chairs in barber shops and salons, and these establishments tend to employ less than 10 employees. Overall, nearly 33,000 people are employed in haircare in Ontario. Being a hairstylist or barber in Ontario is also a compulsory skilled trade, and they must be registered with the Ontario College of Trades. Since the beginning of 2019, new apprentices have had to complete a written exam and a practical assessment to earn a living in this field.

Now with the pandemic, unable to make a living doing their trade, the results have been negative. While some have been able to make a bit of money selling hair care products online or through curbside pickup, others don't have that option and are waiting for the closure orders to be lifted so they can resume their livelihoods. From an economic standpoint, they've made no money over the past couple of months.

Marlene Jansen is the administrative director of the Ontario Hairstylists Association, which represents hairstylists from all over Ontario.

?It would be impossible to speak for all stylists on this issue which for many is very personal. I can speak very generally though, which I'm happy to do. I can tell you that we have been 100 per cent shut down by the pandemic, so stylists have been unable to earn a living in their field, even in a reduced way. There are no exceptions for home-based salons, large salons, chair rental salons-no one

has been allowed to work in the personal service industry in any form since March 20. The impact has been devastating, although some salons have been able to sell products through curbside deliveries, most hairstylists earn their living practicing their craft, not selling products. How devastating the impact has been is very personal, like any employment crisis right now. No stylist has been able to earn money in hairstyling or barbering. The steps that will be taken to reopen will depend entirely on the province's guidelines none of which has been decided yet, to the best of my knowledge, nor released. Local health boards may also add restrictions or guidelines so a reopening in Bancroft might look very different than it will elsewhere, although that is unlikely in our opinion. I wish I could answer more definitively, but there really are no answers as of yet," she says.

Nancee Hunter is the president of the Imperial Barbershop, a chain of six locations in the Ottawa area that originated with a barbershop in the Scottish Chambers Building in 1918. Since 2012 they have also provided renowned training courses for those looking to get into barbering.

"The industry itself doesn't know what they are facing as far as adapting to reopening since it's still quite a while until it is possible. Most hair establishments in my opinion will likely close for good. Too much debt to overcome even for those who did extremely well before COVID-19. Opening will be at a huge loss; profit margin will be non-existent and the cost of doing business had already been increasingly high. Unfortunately, this will open up an underground industry that will promote unsanitary and unsafe environments to the public and cause taxpayers to police it. We hope for the best," she says.

Joanna Kyle is the owner of Elegant Reflections Hairstyling here in Bancroft. She began her hairstyling career with the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and attended St. Lawrence College for her hairstyling diploma. She interned at a local salon and has been doing hair in Bancroft now for over 10 years. In addition to providing hairstyling, she sells environmentally friendly hair care products by Kevin Murphy, and a small selection of hair appliances like irons and dryers. She says the pandemic and government enforced closure has had a huge financial impact on her business.

"I've lost all my income and childcare. We haven't received full instruction on what will be required when we reopen as far as safety precautions but have been watching what other provinces have had to do. Possibly both the stylist and client may need to be wearing masks, or stations and surfaces will need disinfecting between clients and limiting clients in the salon, etc. It will affect how we work and what we can do in a day and may cost a lot depending on how long we are required to do it. There will definitely be some financial impact trying to reopen and gathering PPE. Being home with my children full-time has limited what I'm able to do on the side and have focused my time on my family for now and stepped aside from the business. I've tried to meet the odd client for a product pickup but find it challenging while having kids and living far from town. While this has all been strange and difficult, I am very much enjoying this time home with my family and I am very grateful for the break we've had," she says.

Kelley White is co-owner of Thistle and Bloom here in town, and says that there have been significant financial impacts for them over the months since they've had to close.

"We still have the same bills and rent to pay without a source of income, although we have been offering some curbside pickup of haircare products for those who need. Being such a small business, we don't qualify for any of the 'small business' relief that has been offered thus far. Looking ahead, we will implement whatever the province requires in terms of safety precautions. This is also going to affect our business, as we will have additional costs, as well as more limitations of how many clients we can see in a day," she says.

In a May 18 posting to her Facebook page, White reassured clients they were still here, the obstacles they will face when they do return to work at some point, and asking their clientele to have patience when that time does come.

"Rest assured, you are missed. Our Thistle and Bloom family is missed," she wrote in that Facebook post. "As sense of normalcy is missed? Hopefully I've given you a glimpse of what we're mulling over so we can be prepared when the time comes. We appreciate you all and appreciate your kindness, your words of encouragement and your understanding. We really do have the best clients. Stay well."

Razor's Edge is a local hair salon that offers up a full range of hairstyling services. It is owned and operated by Petra Eaton, a master stylist and colourist with over 30 years experience. Eaton says she's had no income for the last 10 weeks and has gotten no support from the town or the government.

?Bills still need to be paid and with zero income, well you know, times are tough. I'm not even sure I can bring my staff back at this time and even though salons are opening up June 1 in Quebec, that's not the case in Ontario. I will adhere to the guidelines that the government will require for opening back up. One cape per person, no mask, no service, no reception chairs, no magazines, a 15-minute break after each client to clean, and plenty of hand sanitizer at the front of the salon,? she says.

Carol Barager runs 1st Impressions by Carol out of her home, and has been a hairstylist for 32 years.

?It's completely shut me down, there's nothing I can do. I don't do curbside or anything so it just completely brought me to a halt. Thank goodness for the CERB, so that helps. Not sure how much fun it'll be come tax time next year,? she says.

In her basement salon, Barager does everything you'd expect a hairstylist to do, with the exception of hair extensions. One thing she did do was facial waxes, but she quite astutely points out that will be off the table when she reopens due to restrictions.

?I used to sell products but I don't do retail anymore. It's mostly because a lot of it is now available at Walmart and Shoppers' Drug Mart, that sort of thing. So, I don't do that because it's a lot of stuff sitting on your shelf that's not moving, so I stopped doing that a few years ago,? she says.

Barager's a bit apprehensive about where she's going to get the necessary PPE so she can reopen safely.

?I've always worn gloves, as I'm allergic to most things I touch, so I always have gloves. But as far as masks go, I'm not even sure where to start looking without making my own, which is probably what I'll do until I can find another source. People will either have to bring a mask and wear it or I'd like to have some for people to wear as well while they're here. That's something that is going to be necessary,? she says.

While she feels that she doesn't want to rush things in any way due to safety concerns and because she's working out of her home, Barager still feels she could accommodate one person at a time and adhere to all the safety rules and restrictions, because she's a small business and could manage her clientele more easily than a bigger salon.

?I could clean and disinfect and make sure everything was taken care of before the next person came through my door. I could stay on top of that quite easily, and that would be beneficial to me,? she says.

Barager points out that when all the hair salons and barbers come back, it's going to be out of control with the pent-up demand.

?The text and phone messages I'm getting now asking if I'm doing hair or can I do it on the side? I'm like are you kidding me? My life is at risk, number one,? she says. ?I mean I love you and I've cut your hair for 20 years, but no. I don't know who you've been around or who you've been in contact with. I know who I have been. It's crazy. The requests to do haircuts has kind of blown me away. People are like, well you can just do mine. Not only could me and my family end up sick but I could lose my licence. So, no way!?

April Lawrence owns Terra Sun Hair here in town and says being closed down going on three months has had a substantial financial impact.

?During this time, we have been able to provide curbside pickup for products. I have also posted tutorials on our Facebook page for people to try at home,? she says.

They also had a raffle for salon services and products that they advertised on Facebook in late April. One hundred tickets were sold

for \$20 each, and there were three prizes available to be won, ranging from a hair pampering spa day to a haircut and style.

?We are still waiting on word of official guidelines from the government for reopening. We are doing our best to prepare for any guidelines put in place. For example, getting masks, a touchless thermometer, face shields and other potentially required PPE for opening. I personally have taken three extra sanitation and infection control courses through Barbicide and Milady. Once we have set guidelines, I will post updates on our Facebook page and inform everyone when we call them to schedule appointments. We are very much looking forward to getting back in to the salon,? she says.