

# POLICY AT A GLANCE

IWPR #D520 April 2024

## All Americans Deserve Paid Leave Benefits

# **Policy Options for Congress**

Better paid leave policies benefit all workers but are particularly important for women. IWPR's research has consistently shown the economic benefits of investments in paid leave.

Currently, 13 states and the District of Columbia have enacted paid leave laws. Despite this state-level progress, the need for federal action regarding paid leave remains strong. A federal paid leave program should encompass comprehensive benefits and must have sustainable funding mechanisms to ensure the program's long-term viability without compromising other essential social safety nets.

IWPR's research underscores that paid leave is not just a matter of individual well-being but also a crucial economic policy that promotes equity, stability, and workforce participation, especially for women.

- Paid sick time and paid family leave are critical concerns for women when choosing a job. In an IWPR nationwide survey, both were cited as key considerations (77.3 percent and 76.6 percent, respectively) for an overwhelming majority of women in the workforce post-COVID.
- Paid leave has positive economic implications. IWPR's research concluded that providing
  comprehensive paid leave benefits nationally would cost less than 1 percent of wage and
  salary costs. The economic benefits of paid leave exceed the financial costs for a number of
  reasons, including increased labor force participation, reduced spending on public assistance,
  and improved worker productivity.
- COVID-19 highlighted inequalities in access to paid leave and paid sick time. IWPR's research shows that the communities hit hardest by the pandemic—Black and Latinx—are also less likely to have access to paid leave than their White non-Hispanic counterparts. Latina women were especially hard hit by increased caregiving demands, reporting both the highest levels of family and medical leave taken and the highest levels of unmet need for leave.
- Workers in some sectors have few options when faced with a health or family crisis. According to a 2021 IWPR study of construction workers, most members of this group who needed to take leave had to do so without pay.
- Unions increase the likelihood of better access to paid leave. IWPR research shows that union membership is associated with higher access to paid leave benefits.
- Paid leave enjoys strong, bipartisan support. Polling commissioned by IWPR in 2024 found
  that an overwhelming majority (86 percent of adults) said it is important that Congress takes
  action to ensure workers have access to paid time off to care for themselves or a loved one,
  including 92 percent of Democrats, 83 percent of Republicans, and 82 percent of Independents.

#### Recommendations

While states are leading in paid leave progress and there has been an increase in access to paid sick leave over the past decade, state-level laws are not sufficient to mandate equitable paid leave laws. Only the federal government can implement a federal baseline policy that guarantees comprehensive paid leave rights to all American workers nationwide. This policy should:

- **Include coverage for all workers,** including employees and independent contractors, part- and full-time workers, and public- and private-sector workers, regardless of industry/employer size.
- Guarantee a minimum of 12 weeks for all workers.
- Cover an expanded range of purposes, including workers' serious health conditions, parental
  bonding, caregiving for all loved ones, needs in relation to military deployment, and safe leave
  to address sexual and domestic violence.
- **Include an expanded definition of "family"** to ensure that workers can care for all those they consider family, including loved ones outside of legal or biological relationships.
- **Ensure wage replacement for all workers** at a rate that is high enough for everyone, particularly low-income workers, to be able to afford to utilize this benefit.
- Protect workers' jobs from retaliation and ensure they can return to work following leave.

## Legislative Solutions

Expanding paid leave requires complex and dynamic solutions. Some bills that can begin to confront the vast issue of paid leave are listed below.

- **FAMILY Act** (H.R. 3481/S. 1714): Also known as the "Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act," this bill creates a national paid family and medical leave insurance program.
- **Healthy Families Act** (H.R. 3409/S. 1664): Requires that employers allow their employees to earn up to seven paid sick days per year.
- **Support Through Loss Act** (H.R. 6103/S. 3137): Allows workers to receive paid leave time to process and address health needs during the period following a pregnancy loss or family expansion losses.
- Job Protection Act (H.R. 694/S. 210): Expands access to job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).
- Caring for All Families Act (H.R. 789/S. 242): Expands the FMLA's "family" definition to include a broader set of relationships, including chosen family.
- Comprehensive Paid Leave for Federal Employees Act (H.R. 856/S. 274): Converts unpaid caregiving and medical FMLA leave to paid leave for federal employees.

### **Additional IWPR Resources**

- Caregiving and Women in the Workforce (Poll, April 2024)
- Americans Want Congress to Act on Equal Pay, Child Care, Paid Leave, Reproductive Rights (Poll, March 2023)
- Women's Priorities and Economic Impact Survey (Poll, February 2021)
- Construction Workers Need Paid Leave to Rebuild the Nation (Quick Figure, October 2021)
- The Pandemic Effect: Women Want Good Pay, Health Coverage, and Better Benefits as They Re-Enter Workforce (Brief, March 2022)