



Paid Sick Days Improve Public Health by Reducing the Spread of Disease

Paid sick days can reduce the spread of disease at work and in child-care settings, creating significant public health benefits and a more productive workforce.¹ That's why the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that workers with the flu stay home.² Yet many workers cannot do so without losing income or their job.

Nearly Half of all Workers Lack Paid Sick Days

Barely half of all workers (51 percent) have paid sick days, and only one in three (30 percent) have sick days to care for sick children.³ As a result, many employees cannot afford to stay home until they are well, and others lose their jobs if they miss work. Indeed, many workers who are covered by formal paid sick days policies are penalized for using that time.⁴ Low-wage workers are the least likely to have paid sick days—including many who deal directly with the public.⁵ (For instance, only four percent of restaurant workers have paid sick days.⁶)

Sick Workers Infect Co-workers and Customers, Increasing Work Absence and Health-Care Spending

- ▶ Paid sick days minimize the spread of the flu, a highly contagious ailment that accounts for 10 to 12 percent of all illness-related work absence.⁷ A sick worker can pass the virus on for up to seven days after symptoms appear⁸ and is likely to infect 1.8 of every 10 co-workers.⁹ Forty percent of workers report having contracted the flu from a colleague.¹⁰
- ▶ Other viruses can rapidly infect workers and customers in the hospitality and food service industries through contaminated food or beverages. A Nevada jury found that a viral outbreak that sickened hundreds at a Las Vegas hotel was caused by the lack of an adequate paid sick days policy, awarding \$25 million in damages to victims of the disease.¹¹
- ▶ Workers with the flu miss an average of two days of work and work a half day at half of normal productivity (while receiving full pay), for a total work loss of 2.25 days.¹² Nearly half (45 percent) will visit the doctor, at an average cost of \$122 for provider fees and prescriptions.¹³

Sick Children Miss Out When Their Parents Don't Have Paid Sick Days

- ▶ Pre-school-age children are the first to signal that the flu season has arrived.¹⁴ Child-care center rules require sick children to remain home, but in practice, when parents cannot get off work to stay home with them, many sick children do end up in care.¹⁵ This sets up an efficient process of contagion: from child to playmate, to playmates' parents, and to parents' co-workers.
- ▶ Children recover faster when their parents care for them,¹⁶ reducing health-care expenditures. Parents with paid time off are more than five times as likely as other parents to stay home with their sick children,¹⁷ yet only 41 percent of working mothers have paid sick days consistently.¹⁸ Nearly half (49 percent) lose pay when they stay home with a sick child.¹⁹

Until workplace policies and norms change so that all workers have paid sick days and are encouraged to use them when appropriate, many will continue to go to work when they have a virus. Workers may feel they are helping their employers and co-workers by dragging themselves to work, but this "presenteeism" hurts employers' profitability²⁰ and has significant negative public health implications that spread far beyond a single worksite.

References:

- ¹ See Vicky Lovell, *Valuing Good Health: An Estimate of Costs and Savings for the Healthy Families Act*, Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC, 2005, for a discussion of other savings from paid sick leave, through reduced voluntary turnover, lower use of nursing homes, and wages not paid to workers with diminished productivity.
- ² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Influenza Symptoms, Protection, and What to Do if You Get Sick*, Washington, DC <<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms.htm>> (February 10, 2006), 2006.
- ³ Vicky Lovell, *No Time to be Sick: Why Everyone Suffers When Workers Don't Have Paid Sick Leave*, Institute for Women's Policy Research, Washington, DC, 2004.
- ⁴ Melissa Healy, "Call in Sick—Please," *latimes.com*, January 10, 2005.
- ⁵ Lovell 2004.
- ⁶ Unpublished Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis of the 1996 to 1998 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Employee Benefits Survey.
- ⁷ M. Keech, A. J. Scott, and P. J. J. Ryan, "The Impact of Influenza and Influenza-Like Illness on Productivity and Healthcare Resource Utilization in a Working Population," *Occupational Medicine* 48 (February 1998): 85-90.
- ⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Influenza: The Disease*, Washington, DC <<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/scipys/emailprint/print.asp>> (February 6, 2006), 2004.
- ⁹ M. N. Islam, C. Dennis O'Shaughnessy, and Bruce Smith, "A Random Graph Model for the Final-Size Distribution of Household Infections," *Statistics in Medicine* 15 (April 15-May 15, 1996): 837-843.
- ¹⁰ National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, *Flu in the Workplace: Key Facts & Figures*, Bethesda, MD, n.d.
- ¹¹ See *Diane Verderber v. Reno Hilton Resort Corporation, et al.*, 106 P.3d 134 (Nev. 2005).
- ¹² Lovell 2005.
- ¹³ Kristin I. Nichol, "Cost-Benefit Analysis of a Strategy to Vaccinate Healthy Working Adults Against Influenza," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 161 (March 12, 2001): 749-759.
- ¹⁴ John S. Brownstein, Ken P. Kleinman, and Kenneth D. Mandl, "Identifying Pediatric Age Groups for Influenza Vaccination Using a Real-Time Regional Surveillance System," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 162(October): 686-693, 2005.
- ¹⁵ S. Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, and Brian Egleston, "Parental Availability for the Care of Sick Children," *Pediatrics* 98 (August 1996): 226-230.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ S. J. Heymann, S. Toomey, and F. Furstenberg, "Working Parents: What Factors are Involved in Their Ability to Take Time Off From Work When Their Children are Sick?," *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 153 (August 1999): 870-874.
- ¹⁸ Sally J. Heymann, *The Widening Gap*, Basic Books, 2000.
- ¹⁹ Roberta Wyn, Victoria Ojeda, Usha Ranji, and Alina Salganicoff, *Women, Work, and Family Health: A Balancing Act*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Washington, DC, 2003.
- ²⁰ CCH Incorporated, "Being Present in the Workplace Isn't Always a Good Thing," *Human Resources Management Ideas & Trends*, Issue No. 616, October 12, 2005.

*This Fact Sheet was written by Vicky Lovell, Ph.D.
Funding was provided by the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

**For more information on IWPR reports or membership, please call (202) 785-5100,
email iwpr@iwpr.org, or visit www.iwpr.org.**

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and their families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR's work is supported by foundation grants, government grants and contracts, donations from individuals, and contributions from organizations and corporations. IWPR is a 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the women's studies and public policy programs at The George Washington University.