



DC Paid Family Leave: Access and Impact on Workers

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

As part of IWPR's Policies for Action Research Hub, IWPR conducted original research focusing on Washington, DC's paid leave program. This report summarizes findings from 12 interviews with beneficiaries of DC Paid Family Leave. These conversations provided insights into how having access to paid leave benefits impacted participants' financial, mental, and physical well-being, as well as their ability to perform their caregiving responsibilities and their feelings about their jobs.

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DC Paid Family Leave: Access and Impact on Workers

Executive Summary

As part of its Policies for Action Research Hub, IWPR conducted original research focusing specifically on workers who were able to use DC Paid Family Leave, a program by the DC Department of Employment Services that provides eligible workers with up to 12 weeks of paid leave. This report summarizes findings from 12 interviews IWPR conducted with residents of Washington, DC, who have used the paid leave benefits. The interviews provide insights into how having access to DC Paid Family Leave impacted participants' financial, mental, and physical well-being, as well as their ability to perform their caregiving responsibilities and how they felt about their jobs.

Key Findings

- For the most part, **employers do not inform employees about the availability of DC Paid Family Leave**, and residents reported finding out about the program from friends or coworkers.
- **Most participants reported they were not well-informed about the eligibility requirements and benefits** and found navigating the website challenging initially. Nonetheless, they reported that the remainder of the application process was manageable and free of any significant barriers.
- **Without DC Paid Family Leave, participants reported they would not have been able to take as much time off**, as their finances would have taken a significant hit. The program provided essential financial support, enabling participants to prioritize their needs and the needs of their families without undue financial stress during the leave.
- **The availability of DC Paid Family Leave enabled both male and female workers to take on caregiving responsibilities**, highlighting the role of policy in reshaping traditional gender norms.
- **Participants reported a significant positive impact of DC Paid Family Leave on their mental health**, as having access to paid leave provided time and space for recovery and adjustment following significant life events.
- Although most participants expressed disappointment that their employer did not provide paid leave, they acknowledged that **access to DC Paid Family Leave enabled them to stay in their jobs**.

The report concludes with our recommendations for tangible ways that DC policymakers can enhance and improve the DC Paid Family Leave program. In addition, we emphasize the need for a comprehensive national paid leave program.¹

¹To see IWPR's federal policy recommendations on paid leave, visit <https://iwpr.org/paid-leave/>.

DC Paid Family Leave: Access and Impact on Workers

Introduction

State Paid Leave Policies Overview

Paid leave refers to the compensated time off workers may need to take for various reasons, including health or caregiving purposes. Currently, US federal law does not guarantee paid leave for employees, with some workers not even eligible for *unpaid* time off. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, only 27 percent of civilian workers have access to paid family leave (2023). More than one-third of all workers do not even have access to paid sick leave, with inequities across racial and ethnic groups and income levels (Dundar and Jilani 2024).

The United States currently relies on employer policies to provide paid leave. For example, employees may have access to paid time off through short-term disability insurance, though inequities exist by income level. Among the highest-paid workers, 65 percent have access to paid medical leave through employer-provided short-term disability insurance, while among the lowest-paid workers, this rate is only 10 percent (Andrews et al., 2024).

Under the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), federal law requires 12 weeks of job-protected *unpaid* leave, but due to eligibility requirements, less than two-thirds of US workers are eligible for it (Rossin-Slater and Stearns 2020).

In the absence of a comprehensive federal policy, recent years have seen an expansion of paid leave protections at the state level. As of early 2024, 13 states—California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington—and the District of Columbia had paid leave laws in place (Williamson 2024). Nine states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Vermont—have voluntary laws in place, which do not legally guarantee the right to paid leave but provide a voluntary opportunity to purchase insurance coverage (Bipartisan Policy Center 2024).



About DC Paid Family Leave Program

The Paid Family Leave program in the District of Columbia is administered by the Department of Employment Services (DOES) Office of Paid Family Leave (OPFL). Employees were able to apply for benefits starting on July 1, 2020. In order to receive benefits, individuals must have worked for an employer in DC before the covered event (DC Paid Family Leave n.d.)

Events Eligible for DC Paid Family Leave Benefits (maximum per year)

Event	Original benefit level (as of July 1, 2020)	Current benefit level (as of October 1, 2022)
Parental leave	8 weeks	12 weeks
Family leave	6 weeks	12 weeks
Medical leave	6 weeks	12 weeks
Prenatal leave	2 weeks	2 weeks

Source: Department of Employment Services (DOES) website, accessed February 3, 2025, <https://does.pflbas.dc.gov/vosnet/default.aspx>.

Previous research shows the positive impact of paid leave policies on employees. A mixed-method study by Coombs et al. (2022) found that paid family leave leads to improved mental health outcomes by providing more time at home when employees need it. The study also finds evidence that such leave policies support mental health through increased financial security and the opportunity to have a work-life balance.

A qualitative study (Tisinger et al. 2016) explored the awareness and perceptions of paid leave laws with parent and caregiver support groups in three states with existing paid leave laws: California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. The study revealed that the knowledge of paid leave laws was consistently low, though once workers became aware, they appreciated the benefits available and recognized their potential for physical recovery and mental relief. Nonetheless, participants also noted barriers such as workplace reprisal fears, limited time off, and insufficient wage replacement. In particular, caregivers of individuals with long-term illnesses highlighted the inadequacy of current benefits for their needs, despite the general positive impact recognized on families and employment.

Previous research (Kim and Lenhart 2024) also examined the effects of paid leave on reducing food insecurity using the case of New York's paid family leave program. The analysis, which utilized data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement and Panel Study of Income Dynamics, found that paid family leave reduced low food security prevalence by 36 percent, with the most significant benefits observed among low-income and less-educated households. The findings suggest that paid leave policies can alleviate food insecurity and reduce societal inequalities by increasing food expenditures, boosting labor force participation—especially for mothers—and improving parental health. These results underscore the broader social and economic benefits of paid family leave.

Similar findings were revealed in a study that examined the impact of California's paid leave law on reducing food insecurity (Lenhart 2021).

Research also shows that, contrary to common misconceptions, state paid leave policies do not negatively impact employers. A survey examining the impacts of New York's 2018 paid family leave policy on employers was conducted comparing firms in New York to matched firms in Pennsylvania, a state without a paid family leave policy. Using difference-in-differences analysis, the study found no evidence that paid family leave negatively affected employer ratings of employee performance or handling of long absences. Instead, employers reported improved ratings of employee commitment and cooperation, particularly in the policy's first year, and found it easier to manage absences (Bartel et al. 2023).

DC Paid Family Leave provides a higher wage replacement for lower-income earners and a lower wage replacement for higher-income earners. This means that lower earners receive benefits that replace a higher share of their wages, while higher earners receive benefits that replace a smaller share of their income.

Description of Sample: Data, Methodology, and Research Questions

IWPR conducted 12 interviews with participants who used DC's Paid Family Leave program in April and May of 2024 via Zoom (see Table 2 for an overview of participant demographics). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and elucidated how participants learned about DC Paid Family Leave, the process of applying for benefits, their experiences with the program, and their reasons for using it. The interviews also provide insight into how having access to DC Paid Family Leave impacted participants' financial, mental, and physical well-being, as well as their ability to perform their caregiving responsibilities and how they felt about their jobs. Most participants interviewed used the program for parental leave; as such, readers should keep this context in mind when reviewing the findings.

Table 1. Details of the Sample

Number of participants	12
Race	Black: 4 White: 5 Two or more races: 1 Other: 1 No response: 1
Gender	Women: 9 Men: 3
Number of children	Range: 1–4 Mean: ~2
Highest level of education	High school diploma: 1 Bachelor's degree: 5 Graduate degree: 6
Industries represented	Education Health care Nonprofit Engineering Architecture Hospitality
Participants by city ward	Ward 1: 1 Ward 2: 1 Ward 3: 0 Ward 4: 4 Ward 5: 2 Ward 6: 1 Ward 7: 1 Ward 8: 2

Interview Highlights

Turning to Friends and Colleagues vs. Employers for Information

Most participants reported finding out about DC Paid Family Leave from friends and coworkers, not their employer.

Similar to prior research findings (Tisinger et al. 2016), we observed a low initial awareness of DC Paid Family Leave among our interview participants. Most participants reported that their employers had not provided any information about the availability of this benefit. Instead, nearly all participants learned about the program incidentally—often through a friend or a coworker—and many were unclear about the specific purposes for which the leave could be used.

“ I do think that they should make employees informed or even give out pamphlets or even have it on their [website]. . . . Because see my job has a website. They have an employee part. . . . We don't have DC paid leave on there . . . I got my information word of mouth from my coworkers even about [employee benefits administrator], which is the provider that provides leave for [employer]. And so, I think that it would be very helpful if jobs could have that information available to their employees. That way, they won't miss that benefit 'cause it could be helpful for their pregnancy. In the beginning of my pregnancy I was very stressed out 'cause I didn't know what to do, or I didn't know if I was going to make it to appointments or not. And once I was informed of DC paid leave, it all just made more sense. ”

“ One thing I wish I would have done differently is I knew that DC also offered prenatal leave and I definitely think I could've benefited from using that, and I wish I would have looked into that more ahead of time. I mean, I was so focused on work until I can't anymore, but I think had I gotten myself more knowledgeable about how I use prenatal leave, I think I really would've benefited from adding that benefit to my experience. ”

Participants who benefited from DC Paid Family Leave emphasized their intent to spread awareness for the benefit of others. They reported sharing their experiences with family and friends, ensuring that others are aware of and able to access this valuable resource when needed.

“ One of my coworkers is due in a couple of weeks. And when she found out she was pregnant, she and I had a long conversation about . . . my experience with our benefits and with the DC Paid Family Leave. She was unaware of DC Paid Family Leave, so I talked to her about that to make sure that she looked into it. ”

Initial Challenges Understanding Eligibility, but a Manageable Application Process Overall

Most participants reported they were not well-informed about the eligibility requirements and benefits and found navigating the website challenging initially. Nonetheless, they reported that the remainder of the application process was manageable and free of any significant barriers.

Upon applying for DC Paid Family Leave, most participants we interviewed stated that they waited about a week before finding out if their application was approved. Participants expressed their appreciation for the virtual nature of the process, particularly the ability to apply or reapply without needing to meet anyone in person.

“ I found the online process very user-friendly. Initially . . . I didn't max it out. As I was getting close to the end of the leave, I went in and added on the last 17 days that I had available to me, and even that process was very easy. I got responses very quickly; it was very easy to tell how many days I had left and how much more I could apply for, so I was really impressed with the online system and how easy it was to do. ”

“ I remember overall it happening much quicker than I expected and it being a much easier process than I had expected. Especially [reference to another certification processes], and that was a real struggle at times to just make sure that I was getting everything correct, and this was one of the easier processes that I had to go through . . . it looks like I heard back on the 28th of April. My daughter was born on the 17th. So, I think I must have applied for it, like, the 19th, so it was within 10 days that I had heard back. ”



While most participants did not encounter significant barriers during the application process for DC Paid Family Leave, some found parts of it cumbersome.

“ I don't think the application process is difficult. As you know, with anything that's medical related, things are really unpredictable. Your due date, as opposed to the date you actually deliver, as opposed to the day [you begin the leave] . . . those things are pretty nuanced and . . . there's a calendar and you click the dates that you're going to be off. But it's not as easy . . . if you wanted to divide your leave, right? So, for example, I did the first 10 weeks, there wasn't a really clear way to indicate on the [application] that I wanted to take the second . . . part of my leave at a different time. So, in that way, even though the application is straightforward, I don't know that the system is extremely user-friendly or . . . intuitive. It feels a little clunky.”

One participant, who used DC Paid Family Leave after maxing out her employer's unpaid leave benefit explained that although her employer was not comfortable with the idea of paying her while she would receive DC Paid Family Leave benefits, she was able to apply for the program after the birth of her twins, allowing her to stay home with her new babies for 12 more weeks.

“ It was a little confusing because the main website is different than the website you apply on, and the website you apply on is clunkier. It's not as well-designed as the main website. And so I figured that out and looked at it before I gave birth. But then I gave birth earlier than I expected, and so ended up applying for it, I think two or three weeks after I gave birth, and I also [through my job] had short-term disability and ran into some issue with the short-term disability trying to deduct the amount that they thought I would get from my leave from how much they gave me, but that's not allowed in DC, so I had to [along with the HR person at my job at the time] . . . push back against the company to do that. So, I was more stressed out about the short-term leave stuff, and then the DC leave was like, 'Oh, great, I apply, and y'all gave it to me. It's coming to my account. Perfect.' ”

Some participants sought help either from friends, coworkers, or their organization's HR department in navigating the application process and determining eligibility. One participant mentioned that his attorney friends did the legwork to ensure that he and his wife qualified for paid leave and were prepared to counter the decision if they were deemed unqualified. Ultimately, their application was approved quickly.

Time Off Without Financial Stress

Participants reported that without DC Paid Family Leave, they would not have been able to take as much time off, as their finances would have taken a significant hit.

Overall, participants' responses highlight that DC Paid Family Leave provided essential financial support, enabling them to prioritize their needs and the needs of their family without undue financial stress during the leave. Several participants mentioned that DC Paid Family Leave, even with a partial wage replacement, eased financial pressure by covering essentials and helping them maintain stability and focus on parenting without constant worry about finances.



“ My pay from DC was lower than what I make. . . . I hit the cap, but having the amount that I was able to get from DC took some of the financial stress off my family having to afford formula and diapers for two infants. So, it was enough for us to be okay and not be worried every time we needed something more for the twins. So yeah, again, if it had been unpaid, we wouldn't have financially been able to do it and support our family. **”**

Many participants mentioned that unpaid leave was not a viable option for them, with one individual specifically noting that her modest salary made extended unpaid leave unaffordable.

“ I was very hesitant to take an extended amount of leave, just because I was nervous about bills and finances. We're a small organization, so our salaries aren't huge. So, I was just like, 'I don't know that I'm going to be able to swing 16 weeks of unpaid leave or even 10.' I think it just made a difference in our quality of life and not having to be stressed about bills and finances while also trying to navigate being a new parent. **”**

“ At first, I was thinking after I took the leave from my work, where I was gonna get money to [pay for things] . . . you know? . . . So, most of my burdens were relieved because of the finances and the support I got from DC Paid Family Leave. **”**

One participant emphasized that paid leave not only alleviated immediate financial burdens but also enabled her to extend her time at home, delaying the financial burden of daycare for multiple children. Without paid leave, she would have been forced to cut her leave short due to financial constraints.

“ It was a significant factor, 'cause we also have a two-year-old, so we knew once leave ended, we were facing three daycare [bills]. So, we needed to extend leave as long as possible to push off those daycare bills, but also, I couldn't have done that unpaid because we needed to be saving money in order to afford that when the twins went to daycare as well, so had it have been unpaid by the city, I would not have been able to take as much time as I did. ”

Another participant said that having access to DC Paid Family Leave may have impacted their family planning decisions.

“ Without paid leave . . . I don't think . . . I would have had a child when I did. . . . If I knew I didn't have access to paid leave . . . it just would not have been feasible [financially]. My employer at the time offered zero paid leave and so everything would have been unpaid, and that would have just been a little bit too challenging for me. So, I felt really great that I lived in a city that was offering that. ”

In addition to lifting some of the financial burden of becoming a new parent, having access to DC Paid Family Leave allowed new parents to focus their energy on bonding with their babies.

“ I think it allowed me to ease into parenthood a little bit smoothly. I was like, 'Okay. I still have a job, I still [have] income. I don't have to take 10 weeks of unpaid leave and then figure it out from there.' I think it just gave me a little bit of a cushion to not have to be stressed financially and feel like I could still be present with my baby and make sure that he got everything he needed. ”

While all participants expressed appreciation for the availability of DC Paid Family Leave, some emphasized the insufficiency of the benefits and noted that they felt the financial strain of not having their full salary.

“ It was enough to cover the mortgage and the groceries, but it was not enough to move beyond. Also worth mentioning that this was a time when student loans were on pause because of COVID. . . . If that hadn't been the case, I think it would have been even harder. ”

Advancing Gender Equality in Caregiving Roles

The availability of DC Paid Family Leave enabled both male and female workers to take on caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the role of policy in reshaping traditional gender norms.

Having access to DC Paid Family Leave allowed parents to share in the responsibility of caring for their children as opposed to one parent (usually the mother) shouldering the burden of that care work. One participant noted that the program allowed her partner to be able to stay home with their child after she returned to work.

“ I think it’s incredible that it’s also available for people who are the non-birthing partner. When I went back to work, my partner was the primary caregiver for our child and he stayed home and . . . he was also able to bond with our child, and . . . do everything independently with our child without me being an intermediary and I think that’s something, in terms of gender dynamics, that doesn’t always end up happening and I think that him being able to also use paid leave for that time allowed for that to happen.”

“ It was very important, not just to my wife, but to me to be able to go and visit [their newborn] each day in the NICU after we had to leave the hospital and then we had feeding issues trying to get him to latch, so we were . . . trying to get him to latch . . . while also balancing pumping [and] feeding him via the bottle . . . it was overwhelming having both of us there, but my wife has said time and time again that it would’ve been a lot more difficult if I hadn’t been able to be there.”



Supporting Mental Well-Being Through Life Events

Participants reported a significant positive impact of DC Paid Family Leave on their mental health, as having access to paid leave provided time and space for recovery and adjustment following significant life events.

Having access to DC Paid Family Leave allowed participants to seek essential medical and mental health care. One participant highlighted using the time to proactively seek care to prevent postpartum anxiety by attending therapy sessions.

“ I think it was a tremendous asset. . . . It allowed me the space to seek the medical care I needed when I needed to seek it. It also gave me the space to mentally be present with my boys and not have to feel like time was always running out with them before I had to go back to work. . . . After my first, I had postpartum anxiety, so I was working with a therapist after the twins to try to prevent that, or at least be ready if it happened, and so having this extra time gave me extra space to work in those appointments with my therapist. It just gave me breathing room to be able to make sure I was okay, and my family was okay before I had to go back to work. ”



For those with physically and emotionally taxing experiences, DC Paid Family Leave gave space for recovery and adjustment. One participant, whose wife was injured in a car accident and ultimately died, noted that the stress of caregiving, then grieving his wife's death, working, and taking care of his children was becoming overwhelming. He said that DC Paid Family Leave gave him time to prioritize his mental health and his children's well-being after losing his wife.

Another participant explained that DC Paid Family Leave gave her space to focus on her mental health, which was especially important considering the life changes she experienced after giving birth to her first child.

“ *I think it was incredibly beneficial for my mental health . . . it was my first child, so everything about my life had changed. . . . I gave birth with midwives at [hospital name]. I was able to do all of my follow-up visits, and I had a doula as well. I was able to reach out to them when I was feeling overwhelmed . . . and really felt like I had the space available to . . . treat myself how I needed to be treated and seek the care that I needed.* **”**

Having access to DC Paid Family Leave allowed participants to focus on their mental health and overall well-being while also giving them space to be fully present with their children.

“ *It was very significant. . . . I did not have that much time from my employer, and if I had had to go back to work when my maternity leave was up with my employer, I think it would've had a big impact on my newborn twins as well as my mental health. I was not ready to go back. I was not physically, emotionally, mentally ready to be back to work after having twins. . . . I would have really struggled had I had to go back right away.* **”**

A Critical Safety Net Filling Gaps in Employer-Provided Benefits

Although most participants expressed disappointment that their employer did not provide paid leave, DC Paid Family Leave enabled them to stay in their jobs.

Some participants reported feeling undervalued by their employers, particularly when proper maternity leave benefits were absent, despite working in industries like insurance or education.

“ *I work for an insurance company . . . and the idea that they weren't offering proper maternal leave benefits was a little shocking to everybody that I told. So, no. I definitely did not feel valued by my employer.* **”**

“ *Honestly, I was pretty disappointed in my job at the time. In a female-dominated profession, there was no paid time off with the school [where I was working], which I've come to realize is common in DC and elsewhere. . . . It was upsetting to realize, and I was grateful for the DC Paid Family Leave, but some friends that worked for private companies expressed that they got paid both through their jobs and through that [DC Paid Family Leave], and that would have really made a tremendous difference. So it definitely impacted my outlook on . . . how we treat parents immediately after birth, or people who need to take care of their families, and that there could be some more empathy and support.* **”**



Others recognized systemic issues in US labor laws and corporate culture, such as limited paid time off and inadequate formal leave policies. These were contrasted with DC's progressive approach and how DC Paid Family Leave filled gaps in workplace policies.

“If we know like, 'We'll start with your only 15 days of PTO and you can add up,' but that also adds [includes] sick days. So you're like on the mindset . . . 'I can't afford to get sick if I want to have a vacation this summer,' things like that. That's just the nature of USA labor laws and corporate America that doesn't give you that peace of mind that if something happens, you're covered. And I feel that DC [filled what was missing].”

“No, I feel fine with my job. And...I'm glad that the city where I live has more progressive laws that help our taxes to go to places that are meaningful for everyone.”

Access to DC Paid Family Leave was widely seen as a positive step toward addressing gaps in workplace benefits, creating a sense of security and support that many employees had not previously experienced. This leave benefit improved employees' commitment and retention by enabling them to stay with their employer.

“Especially working for a small employer . . . and I know my employer really likes it too. It supports small companies, 'cause then people could still have benefits.”

“I love my job, yeah, from the start, so the DC Paid Leave actually makes it easier and more enjoyable with my job.”

It is important to note that the lack of job protection under DC Paid Family Leave was not mentioned by participants in this study. This could be attributed to the fact that participants may have been covered by job protection through the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or employer benefits that offered job protection as a benefit above and beyond DC Paid Family Leave. However, this does not diminish the significance of job protection as a critical aspect of paid leave laws.

Recommendations for Enhancing and Improving DC Paid Family Leave

- Our interview data demonstrated that many workers learn about DC Paid Family Leave informally, which shows a clear need for enforcement of the employer's legal obligation to provide notice of rights to employees (Code of the District of Columbia). We recommend that the DC government partner with employers to provide improved written and verbal communication about DC Paid Family Leave during onboarding and annually.
- We also recommend that the DC government undertake broader outreach and education initiatives to ensure workers are fully informed about their paid leave options, including the types of leave available, eligibility requirements, and the processes for accessing them.
- DC lawmakers could also consider additional legislative options to:
 - Extend the duration of leave to better support employees with longer-term caregiving or recovery needs.
 - Explicitly allow for job protection during covered paid leave.
 - Explicitly allow counseling or stress management as eligible for paid leave.

Recommendations for National-Level Paid Leave Policy

- While state and municipal-level paid leave can provide critical benefits to some workers, federal policymakers should work to ensure nationwide access to paid leave through a national-level comprehensive paid leave program.
- Any federal paid leave policy must prioritize inclusive definitions that cover a wide range of workers and situations, as well as robust benefits and protections that enable workers—particularly low-wage workers—to take advantage of the program.
- A national paid leave program should be funded by a sustainable, long-term funding source that does not draw funding away from other programs that workers rely on, like Social Security.
- Access to paid leave provides workers with the ability to care for themselves or their families when needed, reducing their financial stress or worries about losing their employment.

To learn more, read IWPR's federal policy recommendations on paid leave at iwpr.org/paid-leave.

Conclusions

IWPR's interviews with 12 participants in the DC Paid Family Leave program highlight the profound impact of access to paid leave on workers and their families. Our findings show that DC Paid Family Leave provided crucial financial support, allowing participants to prioritize their well-being and family needs without undue financial stress. Interviews also revealed significant benefits for mental health, as paid leave gave workers the time and space to recover and adjust after major life events. Both male and female workers shared how access to paid leave enabled them to take on caregiving responsibilities, underscoring the policy's role in reshaping traditional gender norms. Employers benefit from the availability of paid leave as well: While many participants expressed disappointment that their employers did not offer paid leave, they noted that DC Paid Family Leave allowed them to remain in their jobs, reinforcing the value of such policies in employee retention.

Based on these findings, we provided our recommendations for the DC government to undertake broader outreach and education initiatives to ensure workers are fully informed about their paid leave options and consider additional legislative options to even better support all employees. In addition, while we recognize the critical benefits state and municipal-level paid leave policies can provide, we recommend that federal policymakers work to ensure nationwide access to paid leave through a comprehensive national paid leave program.

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