

## **It's Time the President and Congress Made Sure All Workers Have a Few Paid Sick Days**

**Karl Polzer**

Here's something Congress and President Trump can do right now to help millions of working Americans: Make sure they receive a few paid sick days.

Long overdue, such a standard would be particularly helpful to lower-wage workers and their families. It would have little negative impact on employers and, in fact, would help level the playing field for the majority already doing the right thing. It would also help protect consumers and boost public health. Millions of health care, day care, and food workers now have a strong incentive to come to work when sick with contagious diseases. Making sure they can stay home when ill would help reduce health care costs.

Higher-income Americans take sick days for granted and may be surprised to find out what lower-paid workers know from experience: There's no federal requirement to provide paid sick leave. In 2018, 90 percent of U.S. managers and professionals enjoyed paid sick leave compared to only 56 percent of service workers, [according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Among the lowest-paid tenth of the workforce, only 31 percent had access to paid sick leave; among the highest-paid decile, 93 percent did.

The number of workers with paid sick days has risen significantly over the past few years, driven in part by [legislation](#) enacted by 10 states and the District of Columbia. Despite this progress, [34.2 million private sector workers](#) still cannot earn a single paid sick day to recover from the flu, care for a sick child or seek preventive care. Among establishments providing vulnerable people with health care and social assistance, 15 percent lack this benefit.

A coalition including the National Partnership for Women & Families has been urging Congress to pass [The Healthy Families Act](#), sponsored by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.). The bill would set a national standard, allowing workers in businesses with 15 or more employees to earn up

to seven paid sick days each year to be used to recover from their own illnesses, access preventive care, provide care to a sick family member, or attend school meetings related to a child's health condition or disability. Workers in businesses with fewer than 15 employees would earn up to seven job-protected *unpaid* sick days each year to be used for the same reasons, unless their employers chose to offer paid sick days.

It would not be unreasonable to broaden the legislation to require the smaller employers, particularly those engaged in food preparation, child care, and health care, to offer at least four paid sick days annually, perhaps with targeted subsidies to ease the transitions in situations of hardship. The maximum inconvenience for small employers now not offering paid sick leave would be holding less than two percent of an employee's pay in reserve and making sure they have back up (something most businesses need to do anyhow). The [New Jersey](#) paid sick leave law just now being implemented applies to all businesses despite their size or number of employees.

An [analysis by Congress' Joint Economic Committee](#) in 2010 concluded that a precursor of *The Healthy Families Act* would expand paid sick leave for workers in occupations with critical public health implications, covering six million additional food workers and 1.4 million more personal care workers. The committee found that, in establishments with 15 or more workers, only 28 percent of child care workers and 48 percent of personal care workers had access to paid sick leave. According to the report, the bill would "significantly expand access to paid sick leave for many of America's most vulnerable workers." Almost half the increased access would accrue to workers in the bottom wage quartile; nearly half to women workers; and almost one-third to minority workers.

[Despite the clear benefits and minimal costs](#) of requiring a few days of paid sick leave, the opportunity to pass this legislation will likely slip by once again when the political dust storm on Capitol Hill resumes. This is because neither major party puts enough priority on the needs of low-paid workers. Although Democrats are supportive of paid sick leave, they give far more emphasis to [The Family Act](#), which would mandate 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave funded by a payroll tax. Paid family leave will be a much [heavier lift](#). While the payroll tax funding family leave would fall on all workers, it may be of greater

benefit to higher-income families, especially if political bargaining results in exceptions for smaller businesses. Payroll taxes impact lowest-paid workers the most; Congress soon will face other pressures to increase them including proposals to keep Social Security solvent. [Mayor Muriel Bowser criticized D.C.'s family leave law](#), which takes effect in 2020, because it will primarily benefit higher-income commuters who live in Virginia and Maryland. There's also concern that mandated family leave might result in hiring discrimination against workers most likely to use it.

Although [Republicans opposed the Obama Administration's](#) push for both paid family and sick leave, [Ivanka Trump has emerged as a strong advocate](#), again with emphasis on the former. Some have warmed to the idea, but in the end, Republicans on Hill will likely blanch at the cost of family leave. No matter that most [Republican voters generally support paid leave](#), conservative members of Congress tend to see it as an expensive government mandate. Republicans whose tax bill did very little for those at the bottom of the economic heap are just beginning to catch up with President Trump in realizing that meeting the needs of the [working class may be a key](#) to the party's future success. The GOP is also open to criticism that [requiring Medicaid recipients to work is punitive](#) if they can't take time off to see a doctor.

So, members of Congress, before filing back to your partisan trenches, why not commit an act of bipartisan political self-interest? Make sure all workers get a few days of paid sick leave. It will be difficult for the President to veto a benefit with little cost that will help millions of voters in his base.

**Karl Polzer is founder of the [Center on Capital & Social Equity](#)**

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