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What about a few paid sick days? Are low-wage workers simply invisible to Virginia's elected leaders?

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Two years of the Covid pandemic have witnessed considerable hype about the importance of “essential workers” and, more recently, angst about their reluctance to return enthusiastically to low-paying jobs. Unfortunately for them, it's clear that low-paid workers and their struggles fall outside the field of vision of leaders of both political parties. They might as well be invisible.

With the Jan. 12 start of Virginia 2022 General Assembly approaching, earlier this month I was part of a coalition of faith and labor groups that met with Senate Majority Leader Richard Saslaw (I happen to live in his district). We were there to build support for legislation that would require employers to provide five paid sick days a year for their employees. Currently Virginia has no such requirement. We think this issue should a priority because, while most employees in affluent Northern Virginia receive [paid sick leave](#) as part of their compensation, a large percentage of low-paid workers who keep the community running do not.

Work patterns during the COVID pandemic have revealed a sad double standard. While many high-income Virginians can work safely from home, the nature of most low-wage work does not allow for this. Low-wage workers at sites including nursing homes, restaurants, and grocery stores are at much higher risk for contracting COVID, and without sick days, are put in the position of having to [show up for work while infected](#) and exposing others.

We brought [information](#) on the [topic](#), including how [some states](#) are addressing this issue. The conversation was disheartening and worth sharing because it reveals two sobering points: (1) the dire need to educate our elected officials about the realities of inadequate pay and meager benefits available to Virginia's

low-wage workers; and (2) a seemingly uncaring stance toward improving the unfair conditions under which many work.

Citing his decades of service in the legislature, Sen. Saslaw did his best to lower our expectations. Republicans taking over the House of Delegates and governor's mansion would oppose paid sick days, he said. Political acumen notwithstanding, his comments and attitude were disturbing. Here are some points the senator made with loud emphasis:

- Low-wage workers [don't vote](#).
- Most people without paid sick days are (he paused as if trying to find the right word) "[immigrants](#)."
- Hourly workers are fundamentally different than salaried workers (in response to our observation about the unfairness of managers at a local grocery chain getting paid sick days, while cashiers and other employees don't).
- A staffer concurred that they saw no way to treat salaried and hourly employees equally with regard to employee benefits – that doing so was an unreasonable expectation.
- The senator said the owner of a successful restaurant group (hint: they brew their own beer) told him waiters there typically make \$85,000 a year. The senator repeatedly said that waiters that earn less than \$85,000 a year elsewhere should go to work there. When we mentioned the high number of restaurants in his Northern Virginia district where wait staff salaries come nowhere close to this [level of income](#), and named some, Saslaw replied he hadn't heard of those places.
- Requiring small employers to provide five paid sick days annually would put many gas stations out of business. (While five days of sick leave only amounts to about two percent of payroll, the senator did not consider that gas station owners could raise prices just a few cents a gallon to cover the cost. Or that requiring all business to meet this standard would level the playing field for those that already do.)
- Saslaw did say that, if pushed, he is willing to support a mandate for a couple paid sick days -- *if* small businesses are excluded.

Many voters might be surprised to hear that the senator making these remarks is a Democrat, the party that the public tends to associate with being in the corner of the average working person. In fairness, perhaps this seasoned politician was trying to throw cold water on the expectations of well-intentioned but politically naïve advocates trying to help the poor and powerless. After all, 'do-gooders' like these can be insufferable and flat out waste a busy person's time.

If pushed, leaders of both parties will say they support helping low-wage workers. But the social and political circles most Northern Virginia politicians move in largely erase low-status people from their sight and political radar.

Would doing more to help the growing number of families with trouble paying their bills increase their likelihood to vote? And, when they do go to the polls, consider switching their allegiance to a political party that stood up for them and delivered tangible improvements to their lives?

One wonders if this group of individuals, who come in a growing variety of colors and ethnic backgrounds, also is invisible to Glenn Youngkin, Virginia's new Republican governor. If only half of these folks vote, they can make a difference in who gets to run things. Even in one of the wealthiest sections of the country.

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