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The spreading virus calls for fast action on paid sick days for health and personal care workers at very least

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In light of the rapidly spreading coronavirus, Democrats last week introduced [legislation](#) that would require all employers to grant workers paid sick days. Bill sponsors Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Rosa DeLauro showed leadership by separating paid sick days from the Progressive campaign for paid family leave, which presents far higher cost to employers and thus a much heavier lift for lawmakers. As public health concerns grow, Republicans, who have fought mandating paid sick days, should not offer blind resistance and at least consider the proposal for health and long-term care workers.

Sen. Murray and others have been advocating for [paid sick days](#) for a long time – a benefit that most higher-paid people take for granted but many lower-paid people don't have. If Congress had acted on this issue last year, the United States would be in a much better position to handle what may turn out to be a pandemic. Our health and long-term care system now provides a strong incentive for many low-paid people to go to work when they are sick. Lack of paid sick days is now multiplying the pathways through the coronavirus spreads. Further Congressional inaction will likely exacerbate an expected shortage of health care workers. And, given what is known about the novel disease, it's fair to say that it will likely [raise the death toll](#), particularly among the frail and elderly people.

[Research](#) shows that the rate of flu infection is lower in places requiring paid sick days than in places that do not. In an [op-ed](#) this week, Dr. Robert Besser, president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, emphasized the need for paid sick days in pointing out that public health officials cannot work effectively if political leaders fail to improve health equity in the workforce. "The CDC is an evidence-based public health agency, but if the evidence used to make recommendations does not incorporate these health equity issues, we will fall

short. The nation will not be prepared to weather what is becoming a pandemic. If systems and tactics that can help to control the spread of covid-19 — such as paid sick days, shown to reduce the spread of flu in jurisdictions where they are mandated — are not available to every American, CDC recommendations are, effectively, words that cannot be implemented."

While progress is needed on many issues, including universal coverage, Dr. Bessler suggested several ad hoc ways to help stem the current crisis. These include setting up a fund to compensate hourly workers without paid leave for their loss of income when sick; providing legal aid for those who are fired for not coming to work when ill; funding outreach to non-English speakers; asking insurers to waive co-pays for testing and treatment; supplementing funding for community health centers that care for a large proportion of those without insurance; and ensuring free meals are available for children when schools are closed.

These ideas are good start. But the spreading virus challenges Congress and the White House to do more. If the Democrats' latest proposal goes a bridge too far, Republicans might consider a compromise requiring: 1) paid sick days for all persons working in health care, home care, nursing home, and residential care settings; 2) Medicaid rates to be sufficient to fund paid sick days, and 3) providing emergency funds for employers that would suffer financial stress for meeting the requirement. This would protect public health while mitigating financial distress for providers not yet offering paid leave who are operating on thin margins.

The number of American workers with paid sick leave has risen over the past few years, driven in part by [legislation](#) enacted by 10 states and the District of Columbia requiring employers to provide it. 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, at least 15 percent lack this benefit. The number is far higher in the restaurant industry.

In a [Health Affairs](#) article published at the beginning of this Congress I identified political obstacles to getting a paid sick leave requirement into law. In recent years, progressives have packaged paid sick days - which would benefit primarily low-wage workers – as part of an ambitious push for much more expensive paid

family leave. Thus, a relatively low-cost benefit for many health care and other workers on the front lines is being held hostage to a much more expensive mandate that would be of more benefit to middle- and upper-middle class workers. They already get paid sick leave. Obstacles on the political right are obvious. Leery of offending business interests, conservatives historically avoid legislation raising the cost of labor and imposing administrative tasks on employers. Paid sick days are no exception.

It would be civic-minded for lobbies representing nursing homes, home health providers, hospitals, and physicians to support legislation requiring paid sick days for lower-paid workers. But don't hold your breath – not even in the midst of a pandemic. To avoid offending the minority of their members that don't offer paid sick days, they will likely skirt the issue while doing their best in other ways to fight the spread of the virus. I hope that I'm proven very wrong in this assumption.

The threat posed by coronavirus is a rare opportunity for members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to free themselves from the webs of past politics and move forward on this issue.