

Key Features of a Paid Family and Medical Leave Program that Meets the Needs of Working Families



**By the Center for American Progress and
the National Partnership for Women & Families
December 2014**

Working people's need for family and medical leave is nearly universal. But unfortunately, only 12 percent of workers in the United States have access to paid family leave through their employers to care for a new child or seriously ill family member, and fewer than 40 percent have access to personal medical leave through short-term disability insurance provided through their jobs.¹

In order to update our nation's public policies to effectively meet the needs of workers and their families, and to bring the country in line with virtually every other nation in the world,² the United States should adopt a paid family and medical leave policy that covers all workers and is accessible, comprehensive, affordable, and inclusive.

1. Available to all workers

The United States needs to move beyond the current patchwork of workplace leave protections to ensure that all workers have the ability to access leave. In order to meet the needs of workers, families, businesses, and the nation overall, any proposal must provide all workers with the ability to earn paid time away from work to care for themselves or a family member. Paid family and medical leave should be available to people regardless of the size or sector of their employers and whether they work full time, part time, or are self-employed. And any proposal should give people the freedom to relocate to another state or switch jobs without losing access to leave. It must also offer women and men equal amounts of leave time. Caring for a new child or seriously ill loved one is no longer "women's" work. Men experience higher rates of conflict between work and family than women do, and men increasingly want to be caregivers.³

2. Comprehensive and specific in addressing serious family and medical needs

To ensure leave is available for the key reasons people need time away from their jobs, a paid family and medical leave proposal must be comprehensive. It should be sufficient in length and include specific language to cover the range of well-established reasons people need time away from work, such as those established under the Family and Medical Leave Act.⁴ These reasons include: addressing a personal serious health condition or the serious health condition of a parent or other family member; caring for a new baby, a newly adopted child, or a newly placed foster child; or addressing the exigencies arising from a military family member's deployment.

3. Affordable and cost-effective

It is important for any paid family and medical leave proposal to be affordable and cost-effective for employees, employers, and the government. It should replace a significant portion of a worker's usual wages—enough to allow workers to take the time they need without jeopardizing their ability to afford the basics. It should also be affordable for employers and should coordinate with existing benefits offered by employers and state and federal programs.

4. Inclusive

A paid family and medical leave proposal should include a definition of “family” that recognizes diverse families and care responsibilities today. As family demographics shift, parents of young children are not the only types of workers with significant caregiving responsibilities. Thus any proposal should also cover care for elders and recognize same-sex families.

5. Available without adverse employment consequences

Paid family and medical leave needs to be available without any adverse employment consequences. Any proposal should include provisions that protect workers against discrimination or retaliation for needing or taking leave. Furthermore, employees should not be forced to give up important workplace rights or labor protections in order to gain access to paid leave.

Conclusion

Regardless of how a national paid family and medical leave program is financed, structured, and implemented, any program must meet the principles outlined here in order to adequately address the needs of working families today.

Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Table 16. Insurance benefits: Access, participation, and take-up rates, private industry workers, National Compensation Survey, March 2013* (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013), available at <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2013/ebbl0052.pdf>.
- 2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “PF2.1: Key Characteristics of Parental Leave Systems” (2014), available at http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems_1May2014.pdf.
- 3 Ellen Galinsky, Kerstin Aumann, and James T. Bond, “Times Are Changing: Gender and Generation at Work and Home” (New York: Families and Work Institute, 2011), available at http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/Times_Are_Changing.pdf.
- 4 *Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993*, Public Law 103–3, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (February 5, 1993).