

Paid Sick Days: Busting Common Myths With Facts and Evidence

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Everyone gets sick, but not everyone has time to get better. In the United States, **more than 37 million private sector workers can't earn a single paid sick day to recover from an illness or go to the doctor.**¹ Many more cannot earn paid sick time to care for a sick child. Yet a growing body of research demonstrates that laws that guarantee paid sick days – already in place in nearly 40 jurisdictions nationwide – work well and have widespread benefits. When such laws are in place, workers and families do better, communities are healthier and businesses thrive. This evidence dispels myths and misconceptions about the effects of paid sick days laws and, along with growing public demand and continued state and local advancements, paves the way toward a much-needed national standard.

The Truth About Paid Sick Days

MYTH 1: A paid sick days standard isn't needed. Workers can rely on voluntary employer policies.

FACT: More than 37 million people who work in the private sector in the United States are unable to earn a single day of job-protected paid sick time through their employers.

- ▶ Most low-wage workers can't earn paid sick days. Seven out of 10 low-wage workers in the private sector can't earn a single paid sick day (compared to just 8 percent of high-wage workers without access to paid sick days).² Latino and Native American workers are less likely than white workers to have access to paid sick days. More than half of Latino workers and nearly half of Native American workers can't earn paid sick days,³ which means they are more likely to face impossible choices that may compromise their health and the public's health or their own financial and job security.

MYTH 2: Paid sick days aren't necessary because it isn't a big deal to miss a day of work without pay.

FACT: Without the ability to earn job-protected paid sick time, working people and their families can face serious financial consequences, including job loss.

- ▶ Nearly one in four adults in the United States report that they have lost a job or were threatened with job loss because they needed to take sick time.⁴
- ▶ Families without paid sick days often can't afford basic necessities when illness strikes. Just a few days of lost pay is equivalent to losing an entire month's worth of

groceries, utilities or health care expenses for a typical family in which a breadwinner does not have paid sick days.⁵

MYTH 3: Paid sick days laws are “job killers” that harm the economy and force employers to cut wages or workers.

FACT: Paid sick days laws have not led to job loss, business relocation or economic harm according to evidence from the longest-standing laws.

- ▶ San Francisco and Washington, D.C. – which have the two longest-standing paid sick days laws in the nation – have both experienced job and business growth and positive outcomes in worker productivity and retention since the laws took effect. And the economies in jurisdictions that have passed laws more recently – such as New York City and Jersey City – have experienced similar effects.⁶
- ▶ A report prepared by the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor in 2013 found no evidence that the law prompted businesses to leave the city or discouraged employers from establishing new businesses in it.⁷

MYTH 4: A “one-size-fits-all” policy is too limiting for employers.

FACT: Paid sick days laws create minimum standards that employers are free to build upon to meet the particular needs of their workforces, their businesses and their communities.

- ▶ Employers that already provide paid sick time that meets the minimum requirements of paid sick days laws often don’t have to change their policies, and the laws provide flexibility to address particular employers’ payroll or existing paid time off practices.
- ▶ The vast majority of employers in jurisdictions with paid sick days have expressed positive or neutral experiences with these laws. In the year following Seattle’s paid sick days law implementation, for example, nearly 70 percent of employers said they did not experience any administrative burdens or difficulties implementing the policy and 70 percent of employers said they supported the law.⁸ In New York City, approximately 18 months after its ordinance took effect, 86 percent of employers expressed their support for the law.⁹

MYTH 5: I have paid sick days through my employer, so I don’t need a public policy standard for paid sick days.

FACT: People are more likely to go to work sick and to delay or forgo regular, cost-effective care if they can’t earn sick time, which has consequences for all of us and our communities.

- ▶ The workers who are most likely to be without paid sick days often have the highest rates of public contact, including restaurant and hospitality workers, child care workers, and senior care workers.¹⁰ These workers often have no choice but to work sick to protect their own or their families’ financial stability. This affects everyone who interacts with these workers.
- ▶ Jurisdictions that have passed paid sick days have experienced significant decreases in flu rates, compared to those that have no such law.¹¹ And during the 2009 H1N1

outbreak, an estimated seven million people caught the flu from co-workers, but contagion rates were lower and illness outbreaks were shorter among businesses that were more likely to provide paid sick days.¹²

- ▶ When workers can't earn sick time, they are more likely to seek treatment at hospital emergency departments. A federal paid sick days policy could prevent an estimated 1.3 million emergency room visits each year in the United States, saving \$1.1 billion annually in public private health insurance costs.¹³

MYTH 6: Employers will relocate and local jobs will be lost if a paid sick days law is passed.

FACT: Jurisdictions with paid sick days laws have not experienced employer or job loss. And service and assistance jobs – the jobs among the least likely to have paid sick days – serve specific communities and cannot be relocated.

- ▶ Negative employment effects are a myth. Evidence from states and localities with paid sick days policies has not demonstrated any negative effect on jobs. In fact, business is booming in places like Seattle, Wash., where research prepared for the Office of the City Auditor showed that, in the first year after the law took effect, employer growth was stronger than the neighboring cities of Bellevue, Everett and Tacoma combined.¹⁴
- ▶ Occupations in the restaurant, hospitality and caregiving industries are among the least likely to offer paid sick days¹⁵ – these are some of the fastest-growing jobs in the nation and are needed in every city and state.¹⁶

MYTH 7: Workers with access to paid sick days will abuse the policy.

FACT: Workers approach their paid sick days as insurance and use them judiciously.

- ▶ More than four in 10 workers (45 percent) with access to paid sick days didn't use any of that time in the previous year, based on a national 2014 study, and for those who did use the time they had earned, they only used an average of only 2.1 days.¹⁷
- ▶ In places with paid sick days laws, workers tend to use fewer paid sick days than they earn and many do not use any at all. Examples include:
 - ▶ In Jersey City, more than 92 percent of employers said the law didn't affect the number of sick days their employees took – 4.1 percent even said that workers were taking fewer days away from work than before the law was implemented.¹⁸
 - ▶ In San Francisco, where workers can earn up to nine paid sick days per year, the typical worker used only three. In fact, more than one-quarter of workers with access did not use any paid sick days at all.¹⁹
 - ▶ In Connecticut, one third of employees used no paid sick days at all; and those who did, on average, took a little more than half of the sick days they earned.²⁰

MYTH 8: Workers don't need paid sick days. They can use paid vacation days or flex time.

FACT: Most workers who lack paid sick days also lack paid vacation days, and flex time is no substitute for paid sick days.

- ▶ Many workers who don't have paid sick days don't have any paid time off at all –

particularly lower-income workers who may need paid time off the most. In fact, just 42 percent of private sector workers at the bottom of the pay scale can earn paid vacation – compared to 92 percent of the highest-wage workers who have access.²¹ Vacation and flexible scheduling policies may require advance notice and approval from a supervisor. Medical needs don't arise on a predictable schedule, and caring for oneself or a family member shouldn't depend on an employer's permission.

As Myths are Dispelled, Paid Sick Days Policies Advance

Today, **nearly 40 jurisdictions, including seven states – Arizona, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Oregon, Vermont and Washington – have or will soon have paid sick days policies.**²² The evidence is clear: When paid sick days policies are in place, working people and families do better, communities are healthier and businesses thrive.

As state and local momentum continues and myths are replaced with facts, we get closer to achieving a **national paid sick days policy such as the Healthy Families Act**, which would allow all workers – regardless of where they live or work – to earn paid sick days. To learn more, visit **PaidSickDays.org**.

1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017, July 21). *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2017* (Table 6). Retrieved 21 July 2017, from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>

2 Ibid.

3 Xia, J., Hayes, J., Gault, B., & Nguyen, H. (2016, February). *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, and Earnings*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/B356.pdf>

4 Smith, T. W., & Kim, J. (2010, June). *Paid Sick Days: Attitudes and Experiences*. (p. 6). Public Welfare Foundation and National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/psd/paid-sick-days-attitudes-and-experiences.pdf>

5 Gould, E., & Schieder, J. (2017, June 28). *Work sick or lose pay?: The high cost of being sick when you don't get paid sick days*. Economic Policy Institute Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.epi.org/publication/work-sick-or-lose-pay-the-high-cost-of-being-sick-when-you-dont-get-paid-sick-days/>

6 National Partnership for Women & Families. (2017, January). *Paid Sick Days: Low Cost, High Reward for Workers, Employers and Communities*. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/psd/paid-sick-days-low-cost-high-reward.pdf>

7 Branche, Y. (2013, June 19). *Audit of the Accrued Sick and Safe Leave Act of 2008*. Office of the District of Columbia Auditor Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://dcauditor.org/sites/default/files/DCA092013.pdf>

8 Romich, J., et al. (2014, April 23). *Implementation and Early Outcomes of the City of Seattle Paid Sick and Safe Time Ordinance*. University of Washington Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/PSSTOUWReportwAppendices.pdf>

9 Appelbaum, E., & Milkman, R. (2016, September). *No Big Deal: The Impact of New York City's Paid Sick Days Law on Employers*. Center for Economic and Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://cepr.net/images/stories/reports/nyc-paid-sick-days-2016-09.pdf>

10 See note 3.

11 Pichler, S., & Ziebarth, N. (2016, August). *The Pros and Cons of Sick Pay Schemes: Testing for Contagious Presenteeism and Noncontagious Absenteeism Behavior*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22530.pdf>

12 Drago, R., & Miller, K. (2010, January 31). *Sick at Work: Infected Employees in the Workplace During the H1N1 Pandemic*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/B284.pdf>

13 Miller, K., Williams, C., & Yi, Y. (2011, October 31). *Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <https://iwpr.org/publications/paid-sick-days-and-health-cost-savings-from-reduced-emergency-department-visits/>

14 See note 8.

15 See note 3.

16 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017, April 14). *Employment Projections: Occupations with the Most Job Growth*. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_104.htm

17 See note 3.

18 Britton, D., & Lindemann, D. (2015, April). *Earned Sick Days in Jersey City: A Study of Employers and Employees at Year One*. Center for Women and Work, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from http://smr.rutgers.edu/sites/smr.rutgers.edu/files/documents/Jersey_City_ESD_Issue_Brief.pdf

19 Drago R., & Lovell, V. (2011, April). *San Francisco's Paid Sick Leave Ordinance: Outcomes for Employers and Employees*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/A138_edited.pdf (Typical use of paid sick days is based on the median number of days taken by employees in San Francisco)

20 Appelbaum, E., Milkman, R. Elliot, L., & Kroeger, T. (2014, February). *Good For Business? Connecticut's Paid Sick Leave Law*. Center for Economic and Policy Research

Publication. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://cepr.net/documents/good-for-business-2014-02-21.pdf>

21 See note 1.

22 National Partnership for Women & Families. (2016, November 9). *Current Paid Sick Days Laws*. Retrieved 12 July 2017, from <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/psd/current-paid-sick-days-laws.pdf>

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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