

Paid Sick Days Improve Public Health

OCTOBER 2020

Everyone gets sick, but not everyone has time to get better. Every day, millions of working people in the United States face an impossible choice when they are sick: stay home and risk their economic stability or go to work and risk their health and the public's health. A national paid sick days standard would give workers the time they need to recover from illness or care for an ill family member in ways that would help improve public health.

Too many people must go to work sick because they cannot earn paid sick time.

- One quarter of private sector workers – and about 7 in 10 of the lowest-income workers – don't have access to even a single paid sick day.¹ Millions more don't have access to paid sick days because they are too new to their jobs to be eligible for their employers' policies. In total, more than 30 million U.S. workers don't have access to this basic protection.²
- Disparities in access to paid sick days disproportionately expose Latinx and Black workers to increased risk of illness.³ Nearly half (48 percent) of Latinx workers and more than one-third (36 percent) of Black workers report having no paid time away from work of any kind.⁴
- Workers in more dangerous and public-facing occupations,⁵ like construction and service workers, are less likely to have paid sick days than those in professional or management jobs, leading to increased risk of illness and injury.⁶
- People without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report going to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection.⁷
- Many people go to work sick because they fear workplace discipline or losing their jobs. Nearly one in four workers has reported either losing a job or being threatened with job loss for needing to take a sick day.⁸

**PAID SICK LEAVE KEEPS
OUR HOMES, OFFICES AND
COMMUNITIES HEALTHIER
WHILE ENSURING THE
FAMILY'S ECONOMIC
SECURITY.**

— **Dr. Barbara L. McAneny,
Former Board Chair, American
Medical Association**

There Are Significant Public Health Costs When People Cannot Earn Paid Sick Days

Lack of access to paid sick days leads to an increased risk of community contagion and workplace injury.

- Workers who interact the most with the public are often the least likely to have paid sick days: The vast majority of people working in food service (81 percent) and at child care centers (75 percent) lack access to paid sick days.⁹ Workers in these occupations are also more likely to be exposed to contagious illnesses and, therefore, to spread illnesses to the public when they are forced to go to work sick.
- Service workers who have certain illnesses, including the flu or norovirus, are required by the Food and Drug Administration to work on a restricted basis until 24 hours after symptoms subside,¹⁰ yet these workers typically can't afford to take unpaid sick time. In fact, nearly 60 percent of food service workers surveyed in a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study reported working while sick, and nearly half of those workers said they went to work because they didn't have paid sick days.¹¹
- Nearly half (46 percent) of restaurant-associated illness outbreaks involve an infected food service worker,¹² and there are approximately 48 million cases of foodborne illness in the United States each year.¹³
- Lack of paid sick days increases workers' likelihood of being injured on the job, most likely because illness reduces workers' functional capacity, such as physical capability and ability to focus, making worksites less safe. Impacts are greater in more dangerous occupations: a construction worker without paid sick days is 21 percent more likely to experience a non-fatal occupational injury than one with paid sick days.¹⁴

People without paid sick days are less likely to access medical care, resulting in delayed and often costlier treatments.

- Workers without paid sick days are more likely to delay needed medical care, which can lead to prolonged illnesses and turn minor health problems into major, more costly ones.¹⁵ Workers who do not have paid sick days are three times more likely than those with paid sick days to neglect medical care for themselves, and they are nearly two times more likely to forgo medical care for their families.¹⁶ And workers who lack paid sick days are less likely to be able to afford health care goods and

services, more likely to incur high medical expenses and more likely to have a family income below the poverty threshold than those who have paid sick days.¹⁷

- Not having sick days remains a significant barrier to health care access, despite increased affordability of preventive health care services under the Affordable Care Act. Workers without paid sick days are less likely to go to the doctor or access preventive care, such as cancer screenings, annual physicals, Pap smears and flu shots.¹⁸
- Workers without paid sick days are 61 percent more likely than those with paid sick days not to have received a flu shot.¹⁹
- When workers cannot take time off to seek medical care during normal work hours, they are left with few choices for care and are more likely to resort to costly emergency room visits. Working people with paid sick days are 32 percent less likely than people without paid sick days to visit the emergency department recurrently.²⁰
- It is estimated that preventable emergency room visits among workers without paid sick days cost the United States more than \$1.1 billion per year, with nearly half of the costs coming from taxpayer-funded programs like Medicaid, Medicare and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program.²¹ If all workers had paid sick days, 1.3 million emergency room visits could be prevented and public and private costs would be saved.²²

Children whose parents don’t have paid sick days face negative health consequences.

- Working parents without paid sick days are nearly twice as likely as those with paid sick days to send a sick child to school or day care.²³ As a result, they are forced to put the health of their children and their children’s classmates and teachers at risk.
- Working parents without paid sick days are 2.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report taking a child or family member to the emergency room because they were unable to take time off during their normal job hours.²⁴

**PAID SICK DAY
LEGISLATION WOULD BE A
PRACTICAL AND EVIDENCE-
BASED PUBLIC HEALTH
POLICY TO PREVENT
COMMUNICABLE DISEASE
AND TO ENABLE TIMELY
REPRESENTATIVE CARE FOR
OUSELVES, OUR CHILDREN
AND OUR ELDERS. [A] PAID
SICK DAY LAW HAS THE
POTENTIAL TO REDUCE
HEALTH DISPARITIES AND
CONTROL HEALTH CARE
COSTS.**

**— Dr. Raijv Bhatia, Director,
Occupational & Environmental
Health, San Francisco
Department of Public Health**

- Children whose parents have paid sick days are more likely to receive preventive health care – specifically, they are 13 percent more likely to receive a flu vaccine and 13 percent more likely to have an annual checkup, compared to children whose parents do not have paid sick days.²⁵ Children whose mothers lack paid sick days are also less likely to receive routine well-child checkups, dental care and flu shots.²⁶

Paid Sick Days for All Would Reduce Costs and Promote Healthier Families and Communities

A national paid sick days standard would benefit working people and their families, businesses and our public health.

- Public policies that guarantee a minimum number of earned paid sick days provide working people the time they need to recover from an illness or care for a sick family member without compromising their financial stability. And they benefit public health: A recent study found that the general flu rate in jurisdictions with paid sick days laws decreased by 5.5 to 6.5 percent after the laws took effect.²⁷ Connecticut's paid sick days law led to a faster decline in occupational injuries and illnesses in jobs covered by the law compared to rates for those same occupations in New York and nationally.²⁸ In Washington state, a paid sick days law cut the share of retail and food service workers who reported working while sick by eight percentage points.²⁹
- Already, 35 jurisdictions nationwide have adopted paid sick days laws, including 13 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington and the District of Columbia.³⁰
- At the federal level, it is estimated that a proposed paid sick days law would expand access to more than 90 percent of the private sector workforce. This would enable millions of additional workers to earn paid sick time, with the largest impacts in sectors like food service and personal care.³¹
- The **Healthy Families Act** would allow workers to earn seven paid sick days to use to recover from illness, access preventive care or care for a sick family member. Workers at places of employment with fewer than 15 employees would earn seven unpaid, job-protected sick days.

The evidence is clear: When workers have access to paid sick days, everyone benefits.

Learn more at [PaidSickDays.org](https://www.PaidSickDays.org).

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²³ See note 7.

²⁴ See note 7.

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

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