

Paid Sick Days Improve Our Public Health

FACT SHEET

November 2011

Every day, millions of U.S. workers face an impossible choice when they are sick: stay home and risk their economic security or go to work and risk their health and the public's health.

When working people have no choice but to go to work sick, they risk infecting others and delay seeking care.

- Nearly 40 percent of private sector workers — and more than eight in 10 of the lowest-income workers — lack access to even a single paid sick day when they are ill.¹ And more than 4.2 million don't have access to paid sick days because they are too new to their jobs to be eligible for the policy their employer provides.² In total, more than 44 million U.S. workers don't have this basic right.
- Because workers lose pay and risk workplace discipline when they take sick time away from work, they often choose instead to go to work sick. Adults without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely than adults with paid sick days to report going to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection.³
- The H1N1 flu pandemic underscored the need for paid sick days. Between September and November 2009 — the pandemic's peak months — eight million workers went to work sick, and may have infected seven million of their co-workers.⁴
- Not only are workers without paid sick days more likely to work sick, but they are also more likely to delay needed medical care,⁵ which can lead to prolonged illnesses and turn minor health problems into major, more costly ones.

The lack of paid sick days is especially acute in jobs requiring frequent contact with the public, with potentially grave public health consequences.

- More than three in four food service and hotel workers (78 percent) don't have a single paid sick day. Workers in child care centers and nursing homes also overwhelmingly lack paid sick days.⁶
- The Food and Drug Administration requires food service workers with *norovirus*-related illnesses to work on a restricted basis until 24 hours after symptoms subside.⁷ But since most food service employers don't offer paid sick time, workers are forced either to work sick — potentially infecting customers — or to take unpaid leave.
- In 2008, when a worker at a Chipotle restaurant in Kent, Ohio, had no choice but to come to work sick with the *norovirus*, more than 500 people become violently ill. The outbreak cost the Kent community between \$130,233 and \$305,337.⁸ Each year, there are about 76 million cases of foodborne illness in the U.S.⁹

“Sick children are not productive learners, and being in school or daycare puts the rest of the community at risk.... Employees who are parents should not have to make this choice.”

Dr. Georges Benjamin,
Executive Director, American
Public Health Association

Paid sick days enable working parents to care for their children when they are sick — reducing both community contagion and burdens on our health care system.

- Child care centers require sick children to stay home to prevent the spread of illness. The Centers for Disease Control recommends keeping children home from school for 24 hours after their fevers subside.¹⁰ But parents without paid sick days can't always comply.
- Parents without paid sick days are more than twice as likely to send a sick child to school or daycare as parents with paid sick days.¹¹ As a result, they risk their child's health and jeopardize the health of their child's classmates and teachers.
- Parents without paid sick days are five times as likely to report taking their child or a family member to the emergency room because they were unable to take time off work during normal work hours.¹² Unnecessary ER visits cause additional burdens on our health care system totaling more than \$1.1 billion per year.¹³

When workers have paid sick days, they are able to care for themselves and sick family members in a way that positively impacts the public's health.

- Public policies creating a minimum standard of paid sick days would allow workers to earn a limited number paid sick days a year from their employers to recover from illness, care for a sick family member, or attend medical appointments.

- Under most proposals, businesses with equivalent paid time off policies already in place would not have to change their policies.
- At the federal level, a proposed paid sick days law would provide more than 30 million additional workers with access to paid sick days, expanding access to 90 percent of the private-sector workforce.¹⁴
- Six million restaurant workers and more than one million personal care workers who currently lack paid sick days would gain access under a proposed federal law.¹⁵

"[P]aid sick day legislation would be a practical and evidence-based public health policy to prevent communicable disease and to enable timely, preventative care for ourselves, our children and our elders.... [A] paid sick day law has potential to reduce health disparities and control health care costs."

Dr. Rajiv Bhatia,
Director, Occupational &
Environmental Health,
San Francisco Department
of Public Health

- More than 20 states and cities across the country are mobilizing in support of this basic workplace standard. Three cities — San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Seattle — have paid sick days laws. And Connecticut is the first state in the nation to pass a law guaranteeing some workers in the state the right to earn paid sick days.
- A minimum standard of paid sick days would give workers the time they need to recover from their illness without spreading it to co-workers, customers, and community members.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2011, July). *Employee Benefits in the United States: Selected paid leave benefits: Access, National Compensation Survey (Table 6)*. Retrieved 8 November 2011, from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>

² Williams, C., et al. (2011, January). *44 Million U.S. Workers Lacked Paid Sick Days in 2010: 77 Percent of Food Service Workers Lacked Access*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 2 June 2011, from

<http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/44-million-u.s.-workers-lacked-paid-sick-days-in-2010-77-percent-of-food-service-workers-lacked-access>

³ Smith, T., & Kim, J. (2010, June). *Paid Sick Days: Attitudes and Experiences*. National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the Public Welfare Foundation Publication. Retrieved 2 December 2010, from <http://www.publicwelfare.org/resources/DocFiles/psd2010final.pdf>

⁴ Drago, R., et al. (2010, January). *Sick at Work: Infected Employees in the Workplace During the H1N1 Pandemic*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 2 June 2011, from <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/sick-at-work-infected-employees-in-the-workplace-during-the-h1n1-pandemic>

⁵ 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.

⁶ Hartmann, H. (2007, February 13). *The Healthy Families Act: Impact on Workers, Business, The Economy and Public Health*. Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2007. Retrieved 7 January 2011, from http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/Hartmann_HFA_testimony021307.pdf

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2009, November). *FDA Food Code 2009: Annex 3 – Public Health Resources/Administration Guidelines – Chapter 2, Management and Personnel*. Retrieved 7 January 2011, from

<http://www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/RetailFoodProtection/FoodCode/FoodCode2009/ucm189171.htm>

⁸ Hirsh, A. (2008, August). *Outbreak in Ohio: Cost of the 2008 Norovirus Incident in Kent*. Policy Matters Ohio Publication. Retrieved 7 January 2011, from <http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/OutbreakInOhio2008.pdf>

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Foodborne Illness: Frequently Asked Questions: How many cases of foodborne diseases are there in the United States?* Retrieved 7 January 2011, from http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections_g.htm#howmanycases

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The Flu: What To Do If You Get Sick: How long should I stay home if I'm sick?* Retrieved 7 January 2011, from <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/takingcare.htm#howlong>

¹¹ See note 3.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See note 5.

¹⁴ Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. (2010, March). *Expanding Access to Paid Sick Leave: The Impact of the Healthy Families Act on America's Workers*. Available at

http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=abf8aca7-6b94-4152-b720-2d8d04b81ed6

¹⁵ Ibid.

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a non-profit, non-partisan 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 www.nationalpartnership.org.

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