

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



All Latino Workers Should Have Paid Sick Leave

By David R. Jones
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Last week, a coalition of supporters held a rally on the steps of City Hall in support of a City Council bill that would institute paid sick leave for the million and a half working New Yorkers who are without it.

This legislation would be a major benefit for many Latino New Yorkers. Three quarters of low-income Latino workers in the city don't have paid sick leave benefits. These are families that often live from paycheck to paycheck; these workers cannot afford to lose a job or even lose pay for time off from a job. They are often faced with the dilemma of choosing between staying home when ill – or when a child is ill – or having to go to work.

Many of us take it for granted that we can stay home from work when we are ill or to care for a sick child or spouse. When you get sick, it's probably in your interest and that of your employer, as well as your co-workers, that you stay home.

When parents are unable to take time off from their jobs to attend to a sick child at home, it often means that the child goes to school ill, quite possibly infecting other children. Low-wage employees in areas such as restaurant workers and security guards who get no paid sick leave on the job are a threat to our health and security when they feel forced to work when ill.

Thirty-five Council members have expressed their support for paid sick leave, but the bill has been stuck in committee since Council President Christine Quinn can't make up her mind whether or not to support it. Mayor Bloomberg has come out against it.

Over the past year, changes have been made in the bill to respond to specific concerns of some of the business community. For instance, the law would not cover companies with less than five employees, thus exempting the many "Mom and Pop" establishments in the city.

San Francisco and Washington, D.C., have had paid sick leave for several years. They have not suffered economically because of this legislation. Seattle adopted a paid sick leave law last year, as did Connecticut, becoming the first state to do so. Community Service Society surveys have shown that an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers in all income groups support a law requiring employers to provide paid sick leave.

While some in the business community argue that a weak economy is not the time for paid sick leave, there are also enlightened business owners who support paid sick leave – for instance, the USA Latino Chamber of Commerce and New York Women's Chamber of Commerce. They understand that they are better off when sick workers don't come in and get everyone else sick. And with economic hardships

hitting so many New Yorkers, including many of those who are still working, this is a sensible step for the city to take now.

Council President Quinn should allow a vote on the bill. The Council should pass it and, if Mayor Bloomberg vetoes it, the Council should then pass it over his veto. The time has come for New York City to act. Workers should no longer be forced to choose between the health concerns of their children or themselves and holding onto their jobs.

The Community Service Society will soon be releasing an update to its 2009 report, "Sick in the City," which set out the paid sick leave situation in New York City.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.