



New York's Workers Deserve Paid Sick Leave

By David R. Jones
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Between 1.65 million and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. Two-thirds are low-income workers at jobs that offer little or no benefits. Community Service Society (CSS) research found that nearly three in four low-income Latino New Yorkers have no paid sick leave on the job, a higher percentage than any other race or ethnic group. This is probably because they are more likely to be working in sectors where union density is low.

The paid sick leave bill that has been stuck in a City Council committee has a veto-proof 37 supporters, but the bill has not been brought to the Council floor for a vote because the mayor and Council Speaker Christine Quinn oppose it.

This is surprising because perhaps more than any mayor of a major American city in recent times, Mike Bloomberg has led the way on improvement in municipal public health. The rating system that he established for the city's restaurants seems to have worked well. Customers now know that the place where they eat and drink has been inspected and marked by the Department of Health. His efforts at restaurant safety, smoking cessation, obesity, and gun control have all been among policies which will be a significant part of his legacy.

This legislation is an acknowledgement that most workers at some time will need to be away from the job to take care of their own health needs or the health needs of members of their family. They should not have to lose a day's pay when doing so or, in some cases, suffer the loss of a job.

But paid sick days are important for more than workers who are ill or are caring for an ill family member. This is a public health issue that touches almost all of us. Virtually every health expert agrees that paid sick leave would have a significant impact in decreasing communicable disease and workplace injury.

A CSS survey of New Yorkers revealed that two out of three workers with jobs handling food or beverages do not have paid sick leave. Also a 2009 report from CSS and A Better Balance, "[Sick in the City: What the Lack of Paid Leave Means for Working New Yorkers.](#)" found that low-wage employees who get no paid sick leave on the job often go to work when ill or are forced to send sick kids to school.

More than half of food service workers and 43 percent of workers in close contact with children or the elderly do not get paid sick leave. Many are in a financial situation that forces them to go to work sick rather than lose a day's pay. Some are forced to work sick or lose their jobs. So they're fixing your salad in your favorite restaurant or stacking fresh vegetables in your neighborhood supermarket while trying not to sneeze and cough.

San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Connecticut have paid sick leave laws where no one has to choose between their health and their job. Their economies have not been damaged because of these laws. If anything, the laws have been an equalizer for firms that already provided paid leave and those that now must do so.

Paid sick leave is not an optional frill. It is a key benefit to enabling workers to hold onto their jobs while meeting their responsibilities to care for their families and their health. Eventually there will be a law mandating paid sick leave for New York's workers. The mayor and Speaker Quinn should be getting behind this bill, which has been crafted to do the job without creating an onerous burden on business.

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.