

The Mayor Should Support Paid Sick Leave

Why is Mayor Bloomberg opposed to the paid sick leave bill now in the City Council? Perhaps more than any mayor of a major American city in recent times, he 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 graded by the Department of Health. His efforts at restaurant safety, on smoking cessation, obesity, and gun control have all been among policies which will be a significant part of his legacy. But when it comes to paid sick leave, which virtually every health expert agrees would have a significant impact in decreasing communicable disease and workplace injury, he forgets about public health and reverts to being just another businessman who wants no government intrusion on how workers are treated.

Well over a million working New Yorkers – including nearly two of three low-wage workers - are without paid sick leave. The paid sick leave bill that has been stuck in a City Council committee has a veto-proof 37 Council members signed on and widespread public support, 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 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.

Public Health Issue

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. The next time you eat in a restaurant or shop at a market, remember these facts. A Community Service Society (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 the Community Service Society 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.

Mayor Bloomberg seems like a guy who likes to have a good time. No doubt, he frequently dines out at some of New York's top restaurants. These are places that exude hospitality and charm up front. But what is it like back where the food is being prepared? More than half of food service workers, including nearly all restaurant staff, 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.

Economy Not Damaged

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. Moreover, paid sick days reduce turnover and job loss. That helps the local economy because one business's steady worker is another business's steady customer. And a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that we could save \$39.5 million a year in emergency room costs if people could get care during their work hours.

CSS even ran petitions seeking support from Mayor Bloomberg for sick leave, which cited the fact that the City Council, as an act of extraordinary decency, passed a law signed by the mayor providing for five weeks of vacation a year for the carriage horses that take tourists around Central Park. But there is no legislation that provides any similar protection for low-wage workers who get ill. In just days, nearly 10,000 New York City residents signed our petitions. (The petitions are available [here](#) and [here](#)).

So, how about it, Mr. Mayor? When you banned smoking in bars we heard a similar outcry, but bars didn't close and we are all better off. If you can deliver us from smoke-filled restaurants, surely you can deliver us from germ-filled workplaces. Passage of this bill would burnish your reputation.

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 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

From the New York Amsterdam News
May 10 – May 16, 2012