

New Yorkers Get Sick, Too

The push for paid sick leave is gathering momentum across the country. A month ago, Connecticut passed the country's first statewide sick days bill. This follows the lead of San Francisco voters who passed a ballot initiative in 2006 giving all workers the right to at least a minimum number of paid sick days. Since then, the District of Columbia became the second locale to guarantee paid sick leave.

In Seattle, a bill was introduced last week with support of Mayor McGinn, city council leaders, and local business owners. Denver activists have collected twice as many signatures as required for a ballot initiative to be voted on this fall.

The Massachusetts state legislature is holding a public hearing on a statewide bill this summer, and a bipartisan group of state legislators in Georgia led by five Republicans is supporting a bill that would ensure workers could use sick time to care for their family members. More than a dozen other states have coalitions actively organizing in support of paid sick days. The Philadelphia City Council passed a paid sick leave bill last month, although it was vetoed by Mayor Nutter.

The New York Bill

So where is New York City in all of this? Between 1.65 million and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. Since last October, a paid sick leave bill has languished in a City Council committee. It has a veto-proof 35 supporters, but the bill has not been brought to the Council floor for a vote. 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 also a public health issue. The next time you eat in a local restaurant or shop at the neighborhood supermarket, remember these facts. (1) The latest Community Service Society (CSS) annual survey of New Yorkers, "The Unheard Third 2010," revealed that two out of three New Yorkers who work in jobs handling food or beverages do not have paid sick leave. (2) 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.

The CSS survey showed the continuing disparities by income in access to employee-sponsored paid sick days. As is true with other employee benefits, workers are less likely to receive paid sick leave as their income decreases. This is a national fact. Last year, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics disclosed that 84 percent of private industry workers in the highest quarter of average wages have access to paid sick leave, compared to just 32 percent of workers in the lowest quarter of average wages.

Harsh Choices

Those workers who can least afford to lose their pay when illness strikes are least likely to earn paid sick leave. Consider that half of low-income respondents in the CSS survey said they have less than \$500 to fall back on in case of an emergency. In these circumstances, low-income working parents must often choose between their paychecks and caring for a sick child.

One of the reasons that low-wage workers are significantly less likely to have paid sick time than other members of the workforce is that they are more likely than other wage groups to be employed by small firms – businesses with less than 50 workers. The smaller the size of the firm, the less likely that its workers will be offered job benefits such as paid sick days or health insurance.

The bill in City Council states that all employees have the right to paid sick leave. Employers would provide a minimum floor of paid sick days for each employee in a calendar year. Small businesses would not be hurt by the bill. They would provide only five paid sick days annually. And the experience in San Francisco, which has had a paid sick leave law in effect the longest, shows that businesses and jobs have not been hurt, and most employers now support the measure.

This is an eminently reasonable bill which should be a priority issue for the members of the City Council. Speaker Christine Quinn should allow a full Council vote on the bill. It should be approved. If Mayor Bloomberg then vetoes it, it should be passed over his veto.

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

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