

Testimony on Legislation to Support Paid Sick Days

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Introduction

As an economist, my research focuses on the intersection of gender and poverty—what many academics and journalists call the “feminization of poverty”—as well as potential policy solutions.

In Vermont, 32% of children live in single parent families (overwhelmingly headed by mothers). Single mothers face substantial employer discrimination, with unemployment rates double those of married women and men. This is due to what economists call “family responsibility discrimination.” Often the reason that employers give for preferring men and married women over single mothers is the fear that family responsibilities will make them less reliable workers. And yet, as sole providers for their families, single mothers are often the most reliable of workers. We as a society have an interest in insuring the fair treatment of single mothers as workers. The benefits to society of well-educated and cared-for children are widely known in the field of economics. Evidence shows that where mothers are financially stressed, depressed, undernourished, under-educated, and of poor health, children suffer the consequences, including *in utero*, with negative effects on their cognitive development and life-long earnings. Policies that support work-family balance and parents to provide for their children are not only the right thing to do. They benefit society as a whole.

Jobs without paid sick days are particularly burdensome for parents with children, especially single mothers. Jobs without paid sick days essentially represent a cost-shift to the public sector stemming from the social costs that result from poverty, and, as a result, the cost of social supports. In contrast, ensuring paid sick days fosters a healthy work-family balance. This policy remedy improves families’ ability to care for children, especially those families in the most precarious position—single mother families.

Anecdotally, I recently met a mother who had worked for SODEXO until this past summer. She lost her job because she asked for an alternate schedule in order to be home by her child’s bedtime. The former SODEXO employee went so far as to offer to find a replacement to cover her shift for one hour, from 7pm to 8pm (she asked to get off an hour early during the week), but her supervisor refused. Instead, she was told she would lose her job if she didn’t agree to stay until 8pm. She ultimately did lose her job.

Currently, workers have no protection against such dismissals, and there is no requirement that SODEXO—or the 25% of Vermont employers currently not in compliance with the proposed legislation—adhere to practices that promote work-family balance and respect the care responsibilities of parents. Many European countries that have such policies have implemented them at the national level rather than at the firm level and have seen substantive increases in public health outcomes. I consider the absence of paid sick days a serious societal problem, given that over 25% of households in Vermont are lone mother households with over half falling below the poverty line.

A number of individual firms have voiced opposition to proposed paid sick day legislation under the argument it is too costly. Their perspective is a short term one and ignores the longer-term benefits not only to the family and broader society, but also to the firm itself. By taking steps to promote work-family balance, employer turnover is reduced; family stress declines; and worker productivity rises. While it is often typical for firms to have a short-term focus on profits, policy makers are in a better position to take a long run, society-wide view. I encourage you to take the longer run view and support this legislation.

Conclusion

If Vermont is to uphold its human rights commitments as a state, it has a long-term interest in ensuring all workers have access to paid sick days. A failure to adopt sound public policies that reinforce the ability for low-wage workers ability to care for themselves and their families creates a perverse financial incentive for employers to create more low-wage, temporary, part-time, and seasonal positions. Similarly, the absence of paid sick days legislation makes it more difficult for single mothers to both provide optimal care for their children *and* generate the stable income necessary for their families to thrive. Without the policy remedy of paid sick days, there is no assurance that Vermont's low-wage temporary, part-time and seasonal workers, many of whom are women with care responsibilities for children, the elderly, and sick in their families, will be provided the flexibility so greatly needed to balance work and family responsibilities.