

Paid Family Leave Legislation in Vermont

As a mother and neonatal nurse I have a front-row seat to the excitement, joy, and stress facing new parents. Adjusting to this challenging new reality without access to paid family and medical leave puts a heavy strain on parents at a time when they need extra support. Imagine a young family in their mid-20s, native Vermonters, welcoming their new son. With no paid time off from their local small business employers, mom uses the income from her two weeks paid vacation to pay her student loan bills, after which their family income is cut in half. She needs assistance to cover food and health care costs, so she applies for WIC and Medicaid.

As an employee at a small business with less than 10 employees, the new mother is not eligible for 12 weeks of unpaid leave under the Vermont Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), so her job is not protected. She can't afford to lose this job, so when her employer asks her to return, she goes back to her job in childcare after just six weeks of unpaid leave. She feels fortunate to be able to receive childcare for her new baby at the facility where she works, hoping this will help her maintain the milk supply she has worked hard to establish, but sadly this is not the case. At six weeks old her baby is at high risk for infection, so he contracts RSV, Coxsackie Virus twice, and is home sick a lot. Mom takes time off during her shift to pump but ultimately the stress of juggling it all puts her into postpartum depression and at 4 months she stops breastfeeding and pumping.

This is an unsettlingly common storyline for many Vermont families and businesses because we lack a universal paid family and medical leave program. Diminished productivity, employer hardship, and a profound negative impact on maternal and infant health do not have to be the norm. It is well established around the world that paid family and medical leave is a foundation of any successful and thriving community. Only a handful of 190+ United Nations countries do not offer paid parental leave, and the United States is the only industrialized nation on the list.

The US recently had the unfortunate experience of a 35-day government shutdown. Thousands of federal employees experienced five weeks with no paycheck and, rightfully, attention to the necessity of temporary aid, food donations, and credit forbearances captured national headlines. If seven weeks without pay for federal employees caused a national uproar, where is the outcry about our expectation that new families navigate the 12-week minimum recommended for childbirth without a source of income?

The lack of action at the federal level means states have to take a stand. California, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New York, and Washington have all adopted legislation to address this disparity, along with Washington, DC. The experience of these states has been universally positive, with improved health outcomes and lower employee turnover rates. Vermont is a bold little state amongst giants. Most of the world, and the states that have moved forward with paid family and medical leave know that this is economically sound policy that has been proven to optimize business and health. Let us

lead by example. Let us pass legislation that will draw and keep young families here.
Let us support business and family. We can do better.

Sincerely,
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