

New Act proposes national paid family leave policy^[1]

Motherlode, Adventures in Parenting

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EXCERPTS:

For years, the United States has been criticized for its status as an extreme world outlier in its support for families. After Australia passed its parental leave law in 2010, the United States became the only industrialized nation not to offer paid maternity leave. That failing has contributed to the United States' being condemned for human rights violations by Human Rights Watch. The United States also ranked last in breast-feeding support by Save the Children. The case for national paid family leave has been brought up by everyone from feminist academics to Fox News anchors - and me.

I would be thrilled to find something else to write about, and the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, a bill that Senators Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, and Representative Rosa DeLauro, Democrat of Connecticut, were to introduce on Thursday, could grant that wish. The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act (called the Family Act, but not to be confused with the Family Act of 2013, S 881/HR 1851, which seeks to create a tax credit for the out-of-pocket costs associated with in vitro fertilization and fertility preservation) proposes an insurance plan to provide paid family and sick leave to every employee. It would come through coverage similar to Social Security and would be administered through the Social Security Administration.

Any worker, private or public, full time, part time or self-employed, with a basic level of work and earnings history would be eligible to apply for benefits. Small employee and employer payroll contributions of two-tenths of 1 percent of wages each (two cents per \$10 in wages), or about \$1.50 per week for a typical worker, would fund payments of 66 percent of monthly wages, up to a capped amount, for employees on leave. That contribution would also cover the administrative costs of the program. The benefits would be indexed to the national average wage, and the suggested benefit would range from a \$580 monthly minimum up to a maximum benefit of \$4,000 per month in the program's first year, for a maximum of 60 workdays or "caregiving days" (the equivalent of 12 weeks) within a one-year period.

It hardly seems as if it should be worth mentioning, but employees not only need, but want, to care for their families. A Pew Social Trends Report found that more than one in four adult workers took a significant amount of time off from work at some point during their working years to care for a child or other family member. The percentage of workers without children who took time off for another family member is not much lower - and the survey found that "by overwhelming margins, adults who have altered their work lives in order to care for family members are glad they did it."

But many workers can't afford that time, or pay heavily for it through lost wages, time in the workplace and chance for advancement. A Department of Labor survey found that many of the 6 percent of people who need (and are eligible for) leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act and don't take it say they can't afford the leave, while others cut short their leaves for the same reason.

"For most workers, paid family leave is really out of reach," says Vicki Shabo, director of work and family programs at the National Partnership for Women & Families. "Many workers quit, and that's bad for the economy and employers, who pay for employees cycling in and out, and bad for families, women in particular. Less time on the job means less saving for retirement, less ability to actively participate in the economy and less possibility to advance.

"This law will make our culture in general more accepting of workers who have work-family demands," Ms. Shabo said, "in the same way that the Family Medical Leave Act changed culture around caregiving and normalized unpaid time off."

The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act is a game-changer. By promising to provide family and medical leave insurance - paid family leave - without putting significant new pressures on the federal budget or employers by fitting itself into existing federal and employment structures, it demands that anyone in Congress serious about living up to the promise of offering more support to families either consider supporting it, or propose an alternative. As yet, it is new enough not to have been the subject of partisan debate or lobbying by nervous business interests, although both are expected.

If nothing else, the proposed Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act could finally spark congressional action on paid family leave in some form - moving the United States closer toward other modern economies in its support for families, and shifting the seesaw between work and family one small notch closer to balance.

-reprinted from the New York Times

Region: United States^[2]

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