Proposed changes to Canadian maternity and parental leave –
October 2016

This BRIEFinG NOTE provides readers with information regarding policy changes made to maternity and parental leave in Canada.

Background and context

Paid maternity leave was first introduced in Canada in 1971. Since that time, improving it has been discussed on a regular basis. The duration of family leave benefits increased considerably when parental leave was added in 1990 and increased in 2000 but outside Quebec, improvements in other areas have not been made.

Responsibility for maternity and parental leave in Canada is split between federal and provincial/territorial governments, with the federal government responsible for benefits (payment) under Employment Insurance and provincial/territorial governments determining characteristics (such as duration) of job protected leave. Since 2006, Quebec has had its own program, the Quebec Parental Insurance Program, specifying both benefits and leave provisions.

Today Canada's maternity/paternity leave program outside Quebec is considered to be less than adequate (see, for example, The Child Care Transition, UNICEF, 2008) especially when compared to the advances that many of Canada's peer nations have made in the last two decades. Among the key identified problems with the Canadian program are: the absence of a paid leave earmarked for fathers; exclusion of many new mothers and fathers who do not meet the eligibility requirements; low benefit payment levels; multiple inequities between groups of parents by region, socioeconomic and job status, by status as adoptive parents or in the case of multiple births, by gender identity and between men and women.

Changes to maternity and parental leave

Over the years, there have been multiple recommendations for improvements to family leave in Canada. For example in 2009, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women recommended that "Human Resources and Skills Development Canada make maternity and parental benefits as flexible and equal as the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan by expanding eligibility, benefit levels and duration of EI benefits".

In the 2015 federal election, the Liberals made a commitment to work with provinces to introduce new parental leave options, stating that these would "provide more flexibility and security - without increasing employment insurance".
In October, 2016, the Government of Canada released a discussion paper and consultation materials for considering two new options for eligible Canadians who are off work to care for a newborn or a newly adopted child, in addition to the current possibility option of a combined 12 months of maternity and parental benefits.

The federal government is asking for online input between Oct 6 and Nov 4 with regard to the proposed new options and for other suggestions.

Resources

The purpose of this BRIEFinG NOTE is to inform discussion about the kinds of changes to maternity and parental leave that would support families and women. The list of resources (all available online) is a preliminary one. We will add additional resources as they become available.

Please see also the attached table on Canadian and Quebec Family Leave Benefits which provides an overview of type, length and payment caps on family benefits in Canada.


Current maternity/parental benefit websites

Information about the Quebec Parental Insurance Program including a benefit calculator

Information about Canada's maternity/parental leave benefits