

Paid Sick Days Will Support an Equitable Economic Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the deep gaps in our economic and social infrastructure that have resulted from decades of underinvestment and policy choices that failed to center the needs of women, people of color, and families. Yet even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession, too many working people lacked the support and protections to allow them to care for themselves without sacrificing economic stability. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the universal need for—and far from universal access to—paid sick days in the United States. We cannot go back to the way things were; only structural changes and sustained public investments can fix the deep underlying flaws in our social infrastructure so we can have an economy that works for everyone.

Even before the pandemic, working people who most need paid sick days were least likely to have them.

In 2019, [over 32 million workers in the United States lacked any form of paid sick days](#)—including a majority of people working in the lowest paying jobs. People working in essential but high-risk food preparation and service jobs and personal care jobs—industries in which women are overrepresented—are among the [least likely to have paid sick days](#). Workers in these front-line jobs have been vital throughout the pandemic, but without paid sick days, they are more likely to [feel the need to report to work](#), even when they are sick or need care—a phenomenon that not only harms individuals and communities, but presents a risk to public health.

Women are less likely to have [access to paid sick days](#) than their male counterparts, compounding gender inequality and economic insecurity as women are still more likely than men to serve as both [primary caregivers](#) and [breadwinners](#) for their families. [Part-time workers](#)—who are more likely to be women and women of color—are also far less likely to have access to paid sick days than full-time workers. Lack of access could mean severe economic hardship; for workers without paid sick days, taking even a few days off to recover from an illness could mean [losing wages equivalent to monthly costs for groceries, gas, or household utilities](#) like electricity and heat. These realities leave working people with the impossible choice between taking care of their health and maintaining their financial security.

Emergency paid sick days helped protect workers' health and economic security during the pandemic, but fell short of meeting long-term needs.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), passed by Congress in the early weeks of the pandemic, required some employers to provide two weeks of job-protected paid sick days for workers to care for themselves or their loved ones for reasons related to COVID-19.

The FFCRA was the first time the United States implemented a national paid sick days program, and research shows that the law helped [flatten the curve](#) in the early days of the pandemic, slowing the spread of cases and protecting public health. In states without an existing paid sick days program, emergency leave led to a 56% decrease in COVID-19 infections across the state. It is worth noting that this number does not fully capture the potential public health benefits of paid sick days. The FFCRA [carved out millions of workers from emergency protections](#)—including up to [85% of grocery, pharmacy, and retail workers](#)—and did not provide full wages for people taking sick days to care for their loved ones. And because Congress failed to take action, the mandate to provide these benefits expired at the end of 2020, losing a proven tool for fighting COVID-19 just as the country entered a third wave of the pandemic. The loss of paid sick days also may have hampered vaccination efforts; research on other infectious diseases has shown that workers [without paid sick days are less likely](#) to be vaccinated.

While there is hope that the current public health crisis may soon be coming to an end, the need for permanent paid sick days persists—both to ensure an equitable economic recovery, and to ensure that we are prepared for any future public health crises.

National and comprehensive paid sick leave is essential to an equitable economic recovery that supports working families.

Access to paid sick days has been shown to [improve public health](#). Paid sick days can help reduce the spread of seasonal flu [by up to 40 percent](#) during a major wave. Giving people paid time off work means they are [more likely to seek medical care](#) for themselves, and parents with paid sick days are better able to [access health care for their](#)

[children](#) including immunizations and regular doctor's visits. Paid sick days also benefit businesses and contribute to a more robust overall economy. Workers with access to paid sick days are less likely to show up to work when sick—a phenomenon that costs the economy [billions of dollars each year](#)—and are less likely to quit their jobs, which in turn [reduces costs to employers](#) associated with employee turnover. Supporting working people by guaranteeing access to paid sick days is a vital step toward a more equitable economic recovery.

Fourteen states, including the District of Columbia, nineteen cities, and three counties have enacted their own paid sick days laws, some of which provide more generous benefits than the federal proposal, the Healthy Families Act. Research from these states shows not only that paid sick days support worker health and safety, but these laws are also having a [positive impact on local economies](#).

Policymakers can learn from the progress made at the state and local level and create a paid sick days standard that is comprehensive, inclusive, and economically viable for working people.

A national paid sick leave law must include:

- **Meaningful duration and full wages.** Employees should be able to earn at least one hour of sick time for every 30 hours worked, totaling a minimum of seven days of accrued sick time annually that can be carried over. Paid sick days must be fully paid to employees without caps on wages that interfere with the ability to take leave.
- **Broad coverage and job protection.** A strong paid sick days law must protect all working people, including part-time workers and independent contractors, and ensure that workers do not risk losing their jobs or otherwise experience retaliation for taking leave.
- **Expansive and inclusive uses.** In addition to utilizing sick leave to recover from illness and care for loved ones, working people must be allowed to use accrued sick days for “safe leave,” or absences related to sexual assault, domestic violence, or stalking.

The Healthy Families Act would establish a national paid sick leave policy.

Under the [Healthy Families Act](#), championed by Representative Rosa DeLauro and Senator Patty Murray, employees would be able to accrue seven sick days each year. Employers with 15 or more employees would be required to pay employees for sick time, while employers with fewer than 15 employees would still have to provide sick days, but they would be unpaid. Employees can use sick days in cases of personal illness, to access preventative care, to provide care to a sick family member, or for “safe leave” to recover from or receive support related to an incidence of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Ensuring an equitable recovery requires us to address not only the long-term impacts of the recession on women of color and women more generally, but also the deep underlying flaws in our economy that made the pandemic so devastating for women of color and their families in the first place. It is clear that paid sick days is vital to our nation’s recovery and the ability to build an economy that works for all of us.