

# Paid Sick Days and the Healthy Families Act

Across the country, women are struggling to care for themselves and their loved ones while paying the bills and supporting their families. Despite the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic about the importance of giving people time away from work to recover when they are sick, too many workers are still without basic protections. It is long past time to guarantee all workers paid sick days.

## Working people who most need paid sick days were least likely to have them

In 2022, almost 30 million civilian workers<sup>1</sup> 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 service sector jobs—where women are overrepresented<sup>2</sup>—are among the least likely<sup>3</sup> to have paid sick days. Workers in these low-paid jobs often report feeling the need to report to work<sup>4</sup> even when they are sick or need care—a phenomenon that not only harms individuals and their families, but also presents a risk to public health.

Women overall are less likely to have access<sup>5</sup> to paid sick days than their male counterparts, a disparity that compounds gender inequality and economic insecurity, as women are still more likely than men to serve as both primary caregivers and breadwinners<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> like electricity and heat. These realities leave working people with the impossible choice between taking care of their health and maintaining their financial security.

## Paid sick days are a proven solution to protect workers' health and economic security

In the absence of action by the federal government to guarantee paid sick days for all working people, states and cities around the country<sup>9</sup> have passed their own laws to provide workers with paid time off to recover from illness. Evidence from these programs clearly demonstrates that providing workers with paid sick time benefits individuals, families, and the economy.

Paid sick days improve public health.<sup>10</sup> Providing workers with time off when they are sick can help reduce the spread of seasonal flu by up to 40 percent<sup>11</sup> during a major wave. Giving people paid time off work means they are more likely to seek medical care<sup>12</sup> when they are sick. And providing workers with paid sick days increases vaccination rates,<sup>13</sup> which can help slow the spread of diseases. Parents with paid sick time are also better able to access health care for their children including immunizations and regular doctor's visits.

Paid sick days benefit businesses and contribute to a more robust overall economy. Research from states with guaranteed paid sick time shows that laws have a positive impact on local economies.<sup>15</sup> In addition, 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<sup>16</sup>—and are less likely to quit their jobs, which in turn reduces costs to employers<sup>17</sup> associated with employee turnover.

There is also evidence from the federal level that paid sick time laws are effective. In 2020, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA),<sup>18</sup> which 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<sup>19</sup> 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. But the FFCRA expired at the end of 2020, and the country lost a proven tool to help fight the pandemic.

Policymakers can learn from the progress made at the state and local level and provide working people with paid sick days to standard that is comprehensive, inclusive, and economically viable for working people. Guaranteeing all workers have access to paid sick days is a simple, commonsense solution, but one that will have an outsized effect on improving the lives of workers.

## The Healthy Families Act would establish a national paid sick days policy

Under the Healthy Families Act, employees would accrue seven sick days each year that can be used in cases of personal illness, to access preventative care, to provide care to a sick family member, to attend school meetings related to a child's health, or for safe leave to recover from or receive support related to an incidence of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Employers with 15 or more employees would be required to pay employees for sick time; employers with fewer than 15 employees would still have to provide sick days, but they would be unpaid.

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Building an economy that works for all people requires us to address the gaps in our social infrastructure that have long harmed women of color and their families. Providing workers with paid sick days is a vital part of how we can start to build an economy that finally works for women.

## FOOTNOTES

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