

TODAY'S SUNBEAM

Sweeney Amends Family Leave Bill

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By Pete McCarthy

TRENTON —Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney thinks he's made the necessary changes to his proposed paid family leave bill to get it through the Legislature in the coming weeks.

Sweeney, D-3rd Dist., has introduced amended legislation that would reduce the amount of time off for an employee caring for a family member from 10 weeks to six weeks.

"I had to get it to where I could get consensus," Sweeney said Monday. "I feel a lot more confident now than I did last year. We're going to get it done."

As proposed, the measure would allow New Jersey workers six weeks of paid time off to care for a sick family member, a newborn or a newly adopted child. The program would be funded with an approximately \$1-a-week payment by employees who would be eligible for two-thirds of their pay or up to \$502 a week if they take leave.

The measure recently stalled in the state Assembly following intense opposition from the business community. Concerns there ranged from fear that workers would abuse the system, to a belief that company owners would have to hire temporary workers at a higher price.

According to Sweeney, the bill's prime sponsor, the business community has been misinformed, and he is ready to prove his proposal will work.

As part of his changes, Sweeney said he has included a mechanism to reduce fraud. Also, small businesses with 50 or fewer employees will not be required to hold the job until the employee returns.

"We've debated the bill enough," Sweeney said. "We've made a lot of changes to the bill. It's time to vote on it and move on."

The bill has been posted for a hearing and vote on Jan. 28.

If it gets through the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, it would be then up to the full Senate to vote.

Asked if he felt there would be enough votes to get it through, Sweeney said, "There are not going to be an abundance of them, but I think we'll have enough."

Sweeney said he predicted there would be support from some Republicans, and the bill is now backed by fellow Democrats Gov. Jon S. Corzine, Senate President Richard Codey and Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts.

Because state offices were closed Monday for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, attempts to reach Corzine's office for comment were unsuccessful.

Sweeney said he would like to see the bill signed into law by March.

New Jersey would become the third state in the country to approve paid time off for workers, and only the second to implement a paid program.

California currently allows six weeks of paid leave. Sweeney said New Jersey's bill would be very similar to that measure.

"It's not fair for someone to have to deal with something that is not planned and have to worry about losing their job," Sweeney said. "People ask me, Why are you pushing this so hard?' It's because I believe in it. It's that simple."

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