



The Star-Ledger

Jersey group puts a price on cost of paid family leave

Wednesday, December 21, 2005

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO
Star-Ledger Staff

For about \$1.35 a week, New Jersey employees could help create the nation's second statewide paid family leave program, say a group of labor, religious and consumer leaders who hope to have the measure introduced by lawmakers early next year.

Modeled after a law that passed in California last year, the proposal would apply to the 2.8 million workers employed by New Jersey companies who already pay into the state's temporary disability insurance fund, said the New Jersey Time to Care coalition during a Trenton news conference yesterday.

Deductions of roughly \$1.35 a week paid into the fund would provide workers with two-thirds of their usual wages, with a maximum of \$488 a week for 12 weeks a year, said Jon Shure, executive director of New Jersey Policy Perspectives, a Trenton think tank championing the idea.

"The people of this coalition understand the need to end the Catch-22 situation where parents can't take the time they need for their families without the income they need to support them," Shure said. "If ever there was a family values issue, this is it."

Even though the federal family leave law has allowed some 40 million workers to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave since it was enacted 15 years ago, the program has had limited appeal and impact, said the Rev. Reginald Jackson, executive director of the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey.

"Many do not take advantage of the unpaid family leave program because they cannot afford to take it. What looks like a benefit really is no benefit at all."

California's paid leave law is suffering from the same affordability problem, according to a recent study, but it offers workers just 55 percent of their weekly income. The Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children at Claremont McKenna College in California found 95 percent of caregivers surveyed said they would not participate because they didn't think they could survive on that.

The California program did benefit 138,000 workers – 88 percent were parents with a new child – by paying out \$300 million between July 2004 and June 2005, according to the Berger study, released last month.

A spokesman for Gov.-elect Jon Corzine declined to commit to anything until he takes office.

"Family leave and the ability to care for loved ones during times of sickness is a critical issue to New Jersey's families. This is certainly an issue the transition team will examine closely," said Andrew Poag, Corzine's spokesman, who acknowledged that as a U.S. senator "he has been supportive of similar measures."

The New Jersey Business and Industry Association, which represents 23,000 business owners, plans to oppose the bill, said John Rogers, association vice president for human resource issues.

Although the proposal doesn't ask companies to contribute to the fund, it would affect them financially because more people would take leaves and businesses would struggle to temporarily fill their jobs, Rogers said.

"They're struggling with the cost of health insurance and you're asking them to come up with a paid leave program," Rogers said. "Hiring a temporary worker for up to 12 weeks – that will cost employers. And that is if you could find skilled workers."

© 2005 The Star Ledger

© 2005 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.