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Make N.J. A Worker-Friendly State

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Pass Family Leave plan

Is six weeks really too much to ask? Six weeks to bond with a newborn. Six weeks to help a sick mother get back on her feet. Six weeks to ease the suffering of a dying dad.

In most of America, it is too much to ask. But now New Jersey could become the third state to offer paid leave to most of its work force.

It's not the proposal it once was. A 12-week plan was reduced to 10. And 10 was whittled down to six.

As compromises go, this is an acceptable plan. Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, and bill supporters should stand their ground.

Opponents – mainly business groups and Republicans – won't be any happier with further concessions. And although the bill has its flaws, it's sensitive to the needs of Garden State workers while addressing most concerns raised by business owners.

Unlike too many plans that come out of Trenton or Washington, D.C., this is not another unfunded mandate. Workers, not businesses, would fund the leave through a wage assessment estimated to cost each worker about \$33 a year.

Employees could take up to six weeks of paid leave, receiving two-thirds of their pay or up to \$502 a week. Businesses with 50 or more workers would have to keep a job open (although not necessarily the same job) for a worker on leave; businesses with fewer than 50 employees wouldn't have to make the same guarantee.

Most employers already try to accommodate workers with new babies or sick family members. Schedules are juggled. Duties are reassigned. And co-workers pick up the slack, knowing fellow employees will do the same for them if necessary.

When employees feel torn between what's happening at work and a medical crisis at home, they can be more of a distraction than a valuable addition to the work team. Six weeks of paid leave probably won't solve the problem completely, but it would allow many workers to balance family and work obligations.

This plan, which narrowly passed the Senate budget committee last week by an 8-6 vote, deserves the backing of the full Senate, the Assembly and Gov. Jon Corzine.

It would single out New Jersey as a worker-friendly state that also understands the challenges of running a business.

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