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Paid to stay home

The debate over paid family leave is heating up. Labor advocates say it would give workers who care for family members needed relief. Industry leaders say it would add another burden to the state's business climate.

FROM STAFF AND NEWS SERVICE REPORTS

As the paid family leave debate flared up this month in Trenton, Patrick Mangini could have been forgiven if he had mixed emotions.

The proposed legislation no doubt would disrupt the operations of his Manalapan business, Bagel Time. But as the father of three, he is deeply sympathetic with the frenetic life of working parents.

In the end, he said, his business would simply have to take the hit. "To have more time off with the child would be excellent," said Mangini, 39, of Marlboro. Since the leave would be partially paid, "there would be less financial pressure, which then makes the relationship stronger and a better experience for the children."

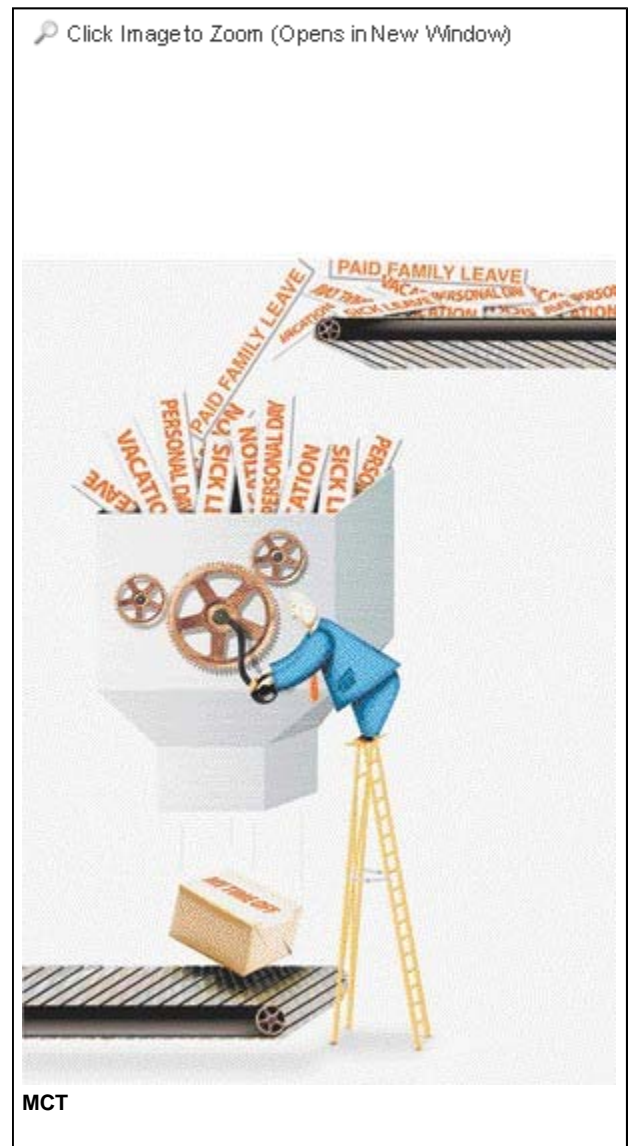
A proposal to give New Jersey workers up to 12 weeks of paid leave to care for a family member is making progress in the state Legislature. The Senate Labor Committee recently gave its approval.

"We feel that (the bill) is a win-win for New Jersey workers and business owners," said Laurie Pettine of the Morris County Chapter of the National Organization for Women. "No one should have to have to face financial hardship while working to care for their family during a health crisis. New Jersey Family Leave Insurance will help to give New Jersey families a leg-up during those times of great need."

Pettine presented the chapter's supportive stance on the bill to the Senate Labor Committee on Feb. 6.

The bill comes as a recently released study shows the United States trails other countries in providing job and income security for working parents. But it also has sparked opposition from business groups that say they cannot absorb another mandate in a state already considered unfriendly to them. One recent study by Economy.com found New Jersey has the third-highest cost of doing business nationwide.

"We always believe the employer-employee relationship needs to be sacrosanct, and legislative interference doesn't help," said Jim Leonard, vice president of government relations for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.



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Roger Koppl, a professor of economics and finance at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Florham Park, voiced some of the arguments against the bill.

Labor costs

"Forcing paid family leave on the workplace would raise labor costs in New Jersey," he wrote in an e-mail to the Daily Record. "It would make employers more reluctant to hire new workers, which might tend to raise the unemployment rate in New Jersey. More New Jersey workers would end up making long commutes to jobs in Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware. It would lower the quality of life of the very people we're trying to help with this legislation. "

Companies offer a wide range of benefits for paid time off, but paid family leave is rare; only about 12 percent of companies offer paid maternity or paternity leave, according to a survey by the Society of Human Resource Management, an Alexandria, Va.-based trade group.

Most employees who want to take off work to care for a family member do so at a financial cost.

The federal Family and Medical Leave Act gives workers up to 12 weeks a year. The state Family Leave Act gives workers up to 12 weeks every two years. But both apply only to employees at companies with 50 or more workers, and in both cases, the leave is unpaid.

New Jersey also allows women who leave work for the birth of a child to collect two-thirds of their average weekly salary up to \$502 this year, typically for about 10 weeks. The money comes from the state's temporary disability insurance fund. All employees are covered, but their jobs are not protected.

Labor advocates say that's not enough. Seventy percent of households nationwide either have both parents working or are headed by a single working parent, leaving many people on their own to care for a sick child or parent, said Eileen Applebaum, director of the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University.

"It would be hard to support your family" on the family-leave income, Applebaum said. "But it can make the difference between losing your house and not losing your house, putting food on the table and not putting food on the table."

New Jersey's paid family leave act is modeled after a law in California that passed in 2004. Employees would be paid not by their employer, but by the state's temporary disability fund.

Job protection

The act wouldn't protect their jobs, although employees who work for a company with 50 or more workers already have job protection through the federal Family and Medical Leave Act. That would leave workers at small businesses at risk of losing their job if they take a leave of absence.

But employees could be paid two-thirds of their salary up to \$502 a week for up to 12 weeks to care for newborn children, newly adopted children or sick family members.

To pay for it, employees would pay an extra 45 cents to \$2.75 a week --depending on their income -- into the state's temporary disability insurance fund. It would amount to about \$1 more a week for the average New Jersey worker, advocates said.

The bill might win support from Gov. Jon Corzine.

"In principle, he supports and has supported giving workers more flexibility to balance work responsibility with family responsibilities," Corzine spokesman Brendan Gilfillan said. "He will be working with Sen. Sweeney and all other interested parties on the details of this bill."

Daily Record staff writer Ellen S. Wilkove and Gannett New Jersey contributed to this story.
