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ON THE WEB

Catching Up on Family Values

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EDITORIAL

Members of Congress and state legislatures talk about family values. But unlike those in other developed countries, they have not done much to help workers with new babies or sick family members. The New Jersey Legislature is in position to become just the third state to address this problem.

Only California and Washington have laws mandating paid family leave, and Washington's benefits are not scheduled to take effect until next year. The New York State Assembly passed a family leave bill in June that is bottled up in the Republican-controlled Senate.

But a bill approved by a Senate committee in Trenton would extend up to six weeks of paid leave to workers to care for a newborn or newly adopted child, or a sick child, spouse, domestic partner or parent. The full Senate and Assembly should approve the bill, which Gov. Jon S. Corzine says he would sign.

The cost, an increase of less than \$1 in payroll taxes, seems reasonable, and so do the benefits. Workers would get two-thirds of their pay, up to a maximum of about \$520 a week. To mollify business groups who blocked the legislation last year, the authors scaled down the original plan of 10 weeks of paid leave. The bill also contains no guarantee that workers in companies with fewer than 50 employees would get their jobs back after a leave.

Federal law requires employers of 50 or more workers to give up to 12 weeks of unpaid family leave, which is of little use to low-paid workers, or even many middle-income workers who live paycheck to paycheck. Business groups argue that paid leave would encourage significantly more workers to take time off and that replacing them would be too burdensome for small companies.

However, a legislative study in California suggests these fears may be unfounded. During the first year of the program, which took effect in 2004, only about 1 percent of the eligible employees filed for benefits – a number that has not increased significantly since. Employees in workplaces of fewer than 10 people took leave in much smaller proportions than those in large workplaces. Large majorities of those who took paid leave were women, and about 80 percent of the men and women receiving paid leave did so to spend time with newborns or newly adopted children. A majority of the remaining workers took leave because a family member suffered from cancer or was recovering from surgery.

A survey by the McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy reports that 169 countries offer mothers paid maternal leave and 66 offer new fathers paid leave. Thirty-nine nations grant paid leave to workers whose children are ill, and 23 offer it to employees to care for other family members.

It's time for more states in America to follow suit. Better yet, Congress should make paid family leave national policy. Elected officials would then be in a better position to talk about the importance of the family without sounding hypocritical.

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