

HERALDNEWS

Paid Family Leave Bill Advances

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HERALD NEWS

Ana Legreaux, of Haledon, had to leave her job for months after the birth of her children. The missing paycheck caused serious financial strain on her family, and with her mother now ill, she fears having to forgo work again.

"I'd have to sell my house," said Legreaux, 37, who said her employer, the U.S. Postal Service, is strict about the use of vacation and sick time. "If I don't bank the days, I'm out on my own. I don't have any leniency."

New Jersey lawmakers are trying to give workers more flexibility by becoming the second state after California to offer paid leave for new parents or those caring for a family member. The state Senate Labor Committee passed family leave legislation on Monday by a 3-1 vote, the furthest the bill has gone in the 10 years since it was first introduced.

Advocates think passage is now likely since the cost was shifted from employers to workers, who could be eligible to receive up to \$502 in weekly benefits, paid for by a 1 percent deduction from their paychecks year-round. Mothers and fathers could take up to 12 weeks of leave after the birth of a child, or if their spouse, parent or child fell seriously ill.

The Senate heard hours of testimony on the issue from unions and other supporters, who say the legislation will especially help those caring for an elderly parent or couples wanting to bond with their newborn. Lawmakers also got an earful from smaller employers, who fear that holding open positions will hurt their business.

"If more than one employee takes this leave simultaneously, it could be a situation where a business virtually shuts down," said Lori Anne Oliwa, of the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners.

The benefit will cost companies nothing, as it will be administered by the state Temporary Disability Insurance fund and paid for by workers. One dollar would be withdrawn from every \$1,000 earned.

Legreaux, of Haledon, could have used the support after having three Caesarian sections and suffering severe post-partum depression. Though her husband finagled a few compensation days from his employer, Legreaux wasn't so lucky.

"I had to pay for my own disability insurance," she said.

Under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, workers can have up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave. Employees have job protection, unless their company employs fewer than 50.

New Jersey's paid leave would mirror the rule.

"I don't think it will cause any negative impacts for the business community," said Assemblyman Thomas Giblin, D-Clifton, a co-sponsor of the Assembly's version of the bill.

Still, many small employers are worried.

"We are not big enough to hold open positions for that long of a time," said JoAnn MacBeth, a Clifton member of NJAWBO and self-employed computer consultant.

Kate McAteer of Women in Transition, a Wayne program for displaced homemakers, thinks the benefit could help many of her clients, but she also worries about staffing. When one of her workers went on leave for six weeks, her staff had to absorb the extra workload. "By the end, it starts to wear everyone down," McAteer said.

The average leave time in California was 4.84 weeks – less than the law allows – according to state data. Many people caring for a parent take just two weeks, said Kim Kruckel of the Employment Law Center, a San Francisco-based organization that advocated for the passage of California's program in 2004.

Mary Kuzinski, who directs Passaic County's senior services, thought the paid leave could be a boon for adult children having to juggle work and big decisions about an ailing parent. "The siblings don't always agree. Or it falls on one particular person. It's a very difficult decision," Kuzinski said.

The bill will likely go before the state Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee before a full vote. Brendan Gilfillan, a spokesman for Gov. Jon S. Corzine, said the administration supports paid family leave.

U.S. senators are looking to introduce a similar bill on the federal level, according to Charles Wowkanech of the New Jersey AFL-CIO, which has lobbied for the legislation for a decade.

"We are very optimistic," Wowkanech said.

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Paid family leave

Lawmakers are moving forward with a bill that would make New Jersey the second state in the nation to offer paid family leave for employees. Here's how it would work:

Women and men would be eligible for up to 12 weeks of paid leave after the birth of a child, or to care for a seriously ill parent, spouse or child.

Workers would pay for the benefit through a 1 percent deduction from their salaries into the state Temporary Disability Insurance. An employee making \$50,000 a year would contribute 50 cents a week. The average annual cost to workers would be \$37.

The benefit would provide two-thirds of weekly pay up to an annual salary of \$94,000. The maximum claim would be \$502 a week. Someone who earns \$10 an hour, for example, would receive \$268 a week.

Job security would be mandated for companies with at least 50 employees.

Doctor's notices must validate the pregnancy or illness.

Source: New Jersey AFL-CIO and the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University

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