



## Family Leave Gets A Push

By Scott Goldstein - 11/13/2006

STATEHOUSE - A diverse coalition of organizations, including the state's largest union, is pushing a bill (S-2249) that would extend family leave to workers at companies with 50 or fewer employees, and would, for the first time, grant disability pay to workers who take up to 12 weeks off to care for members of their immediate family.

Currently, state and federal laws require only businesses with more than 50 employees to offer 12 weeks of unpaid family leave.

The bill, which will face stiff opposition from business advocates, was introduced last month by Sen. Stephen M. Sweeney (D-Gloucester). It would allow private- and public-sector employees to take up to 12 weeks off per year to care for seriously ill members of their immediate families, as well as for newborns and newly adopted children. The workers would be entitled to two-thirds of their pay, up to \$488 per week. The company would be permitted to require that the employee take up to two weeks of available sick or vacation time before receiving benefits under the bill.

"More parents work now than have ever worked before; the demands of job and family are becoming even more of a challenge," said Karen White, senior program administrator at The Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations, which supports the bill. "Without a paid system in place, workers have to decide whether they go to work and pay for food on the table or stay home to care for a family member."

Under the Sweeney bill, the money for this benefit would come from the Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) fund that employees already contribute to through paycheck deductions. Workers would be required to pay an additional one-tenth of 1 percent. Employees making the \$7.15 minimum wage would pay an additional 28 cents a week; those making \$94,000 would pay an additional \$1.80 per week. The average worker would pay less than a dollar per week, supporters say.

But business advocates say that companies can't afford to lose key employees for 12-week stretches, and that mandating it could further damage New Jersey's already-poor reputation among businesses.

"We are prepared to fight it with everything at our disposal," said Phil Kirschner, president of the New Jersey Business & Industry Association. "To us, it is ludicrous to push this type of legislation while the state is trying to do everything it can to try to retain and attract business. The business climate is not good in the state and mandates like this, which would be the broadest in the country, are really like flashing a neon sign that says, 'Don't come here.'"

He also doubts that the employees' small additional contributions to TDI would generate enough revenue to cover the cost of the benefit. "It's irrational to believe that we will come anywhere near covering the cost of this program," he says, and worries that "employers will get stuck paying the balance."

Jim Leonard, legislative lobbyist for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, said he sees problems with the bill, but he praised it in one respect, saying it is better than some past proposals to expand family leave.

Former Gov. Jim McGreevey, for example, proposed family leave that would give workers days off to attend to various family commitments, like parent-teacher conferences and children's doctors' appointments.

"I'll give them credit," Leonard said. "They've addressed some of the concerns the business community has had in the past with proposed bills." Still, he thinks the bill would hurt small businesses. "Imagine if you have a five-person shop and one person takes this leave," he said. "This might cause a hardship."

The program is modeled after a similar one in California. But the two-year-old law requires workers to be paid for only six weeks, not 12, Leonard said. And New Jersey is one of five states that already pays disability benefits to pregnant women.

But supporters of the bill say implementation would not be a heavy lift. "Since New Jersey already has TDI in place, it could easily be expanded to include family leave at minimal cost with no new bureaucracy," says White, at Rutgers University.

And the benefits would only be extended to employees who had serious medical issues in their immediate families, said Jon Shure, president of Trenton-based New Jersey Policy Perspective, a nonpartisan public-policy research organization. "The number of workers who do this is small," Shure said. "It's for major illnesses to child, spouse or parent. That doesn't happen that often."

Further, he said, many workers who do need to care for family members will choose to leave work, even if it means they could lose their jobs. Under the new bill, "The person comes back and you don't have to deal with finding and retraining a new employee," Shure said. "It's a win-win for everybody."

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