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New Push for Paid Family Leave in N.J.

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) -- Diane Blanco knows life can change quickly.

One Friday in October, the Saddle Brook woman was in a doctor's office with her ailing 16-year-old son, Guy. Three days later, Blanco was helping tend to the boy in an intensive care unit as he was treated for pulmonary hypertension caused by high blood pressure.

"It was something I didn't plan," said the 45-year-old software company administrator, who used all three weeks of her vacation time while caring for her son. "God forbid, if something else happens, I have nothing to take now."

New Jersey legislators have been trying for years to pass a bill that would offer money to people such as Blanco who need time off work to care for a sick family member or for a newborn. Called paid family leave, the measures have always failed amid heavy opposition from businesses who didn't want to pay for the program.

But a new plan by a Democratic senator to pay people for up to 12 weeks off work may be building momentum.

"It's a fairness issue for workers," said state Sen. Stephen Sweeney. "It's so important that if you have someone you need to care for that you can care for them."

Federal law has allowed workers in businesses with at least 50 employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave since 1993, but New Jersey would become only the second state to authorize paid family leave. California lets workers to take up to six weeks of paid leave.

"We all have families," Blanco said. "Things do happen, and sometimes things that you just don't plan for. In my case I was in the doctor's office on a Friday and I was in the hospital on Monday."

Under Sweeney's plan, workers who take leave from work would be paid through the state's temporary disability insurance fund, which allows people who miss time from work because of illness or injury to receive two-thirds of their weekly wages, up to \$488 per week. People taking paid family leave would receive the same benefits.

The leave would be funded by a 0.1 percent charge against a worker's weekly wages. Legislative officials estimate that would cost most workers less than \$1 per week.

Most New Jersey workers pay \$129 per year in temporary disability insurance through their paychecks.

"It's 100 percent employee-paid," Sweeney said. "We think we've got it right. We really think this is something that could be a national model."

Sweeney holds sway as chairman of the Senate Labor Committee and plans to push the measure once the Legislature completes its work on lowering property taxes in the coming weeks. He said he's been working for three years to ease business concerns about the bill.

The legislation is supported by organized labor and groups that advocate for women, minorities, children and the poor. The groups formed the New Jersey Time to Care Coalition, which on Wednesday plans to unveil a poll measuring statewide support for paid family leave.

Eileen Appelbaum, professor and director of the Center for Women and Work at [Rutgers University](#), which doesn't endorse bills but supports family leave policies, said the center's research has found most people who need to take such a leave only need two weeks off.

"We want people to be able to fulfill their responsibilities for their employees and fulfill their responsibilities for their families," she said.

Gov. [Jon Corzine's](#) office said it is looking into the measure.

"The administration believes workers should have the support they need to balance work responsibilities with their families' needs, and we're reviewing Mr. Sweeney's legislation," Corzine spokesman Anthony Coley said.

But businesses remain concerned.

"At a time when New Jersey is trying to climb out of the economic basement, we don't need legislation like this that will push us back in a hole," said Jim Leonard, chief lobbyist for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

Though Sweeney's plan wouldn't require employers to pay for the leave, Leonard and John Rogers, a vice president with the New Jersey Business & Industry Association, said businesses worry they'll be charged if the disability fund falters.

Rogers said employers would also have to pay for temporary workers to fill vacant spots.

"To heap another one-size-fits-all mandate on New Jersey employers is not the way to go," Rogers said.