

# The Star-Ledger

## In a first, Senate committee approves paid family leave bill

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BY TOM HESTER

**Star-Ledger Staff**

Legislation to provide up to 12 weeks of paid leave for New Jersey workers to care for sick family members, newborns or newly adopted children was approved by the Senate Labor Committee yesterday.

The action marked the first time in the decade the proposal has lingered in the Legislature that it was approved by a committee. But the bill (S-2249), which is strongly supported by organized labor, is just as strongly opposed by business and local government.

Gov. Jon Corzine said he supports the idea of paid family leave, but is focused on reducing New Jersey's property tax burden.

"I haven't studied the bill," he said. "Conceptually, I'm in favor of paid family leave, but I don't think this is the priority that we ought to be focusing on. We ought to bring conclusion to the property tax debate."

Under the legislation, New Jersey's 4 million workers would be required to contribute to the state Disability Fund 0.1 percent of their wages, in addition to money they already contribute.

The contribution, about \$1 for every \$1,000 in wages up to a maximum \$94 annually, would be deposited in a new fund reserved for funding the Family Leave program. Most workers already pay \$129 per year in temporary disability insurance through their paychecks. Neither business nor the state would contribute to the family leave fund.

People who take family leave would receive two-thirds of their weekly wages up to \$488 a week, the same amount they would get if sidelined with a temporary disability. New Jersey workers in a business or company that employs 50 or more people may presently take 12 weeks of unpaid leave under state and federal law.

Charles Wowkanech, president of the New Jersey AFL-CIO, is spearheading the paid-leave push with the support of nonprofit citizen organizations and church leaders. He said the measure has support among Democrats and Republicans.

"New Jersey should set an example for the nation," Wowkanech said. "This is the best social insurance program bar none."

The New Jersey Business and Industry Association is leading the opposition. Philip Kirschner, the organization's president, told the Labor Committee it is unrealistic to expect businesses to do without employees for almost three months.

"Businesses will be forced to pay for temporary workers, overtime or lost productivity in their workplaces," Kirschner said. "Some tasks will simply not get done. In many cases, it will be difficult to find skilled workers for these positions. This will hurt the businesses' reputation with their customers and suppliers and put them at a competitive disadvantage with our neighboring states."

Only California has a paid family leave program, which provides up to six weeks of pay.

Jon Shure, president of New Jersey Policy Perspective, a Trenton-based liberal think tank, told the panel, "At times like these we need to recall (there was opposition) to 'radical' measures like the 8-hour day, 40-hour week, unemployment insurance, child labor laws, minimum wage, Social Security. You will find quotes from decades past where business called these socialistic, communistic, anti-Christian, you name it."

The measure is co-sponsored by Sens. Barbara Buono (D-Middlesex) and Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester).

"Far too many individuals have had to make the tough decision between caring for a loved one and being able to maintain their income," Buono said. "Far too many mothers and fathers have had to rush back to work after the birth of their child. These choices should never have to be made in the United States and soon they will no longer be choices forced upon New Jersey families."

The measure moves to the Senate Appropriations Committee for consideration.