Paid Sick Days: Low Cost, High Reward for Workers, Families and Communities

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About 5.7 million people who hold jobs in six cities and one state in the United States are legally guaranteed the right to earn sick days they can use to recover from illness or care for family members. Paid sick days keep families financially secure, workplaces and communities healthy and productive, and businesses and the economy strong. A growing body of evidence assessing existing laws shows that paid sick days make business and economic sense.

San Francisco

San Francisco’s groundbreaking Paid Sick Leave Ordinance, which covers all workers in the city, took effect on February 5, 2007. It guarantees 611,200 workers in the city access to paid sick days.1 Three years after the law’s implementation, more than 70 percent of employers reported no impact on profitability (another 15 percent said they didn’t know) and two-thirds of employers expressed support for the law. Although workers can earn up to nine paid sick days under the law, the typical worker used only three, and reports of abuse were exceptionally rare.2 San Francisco’s economy has continued to grow since implementation of the law, with job and business growth rates among both small and large businesses outperforming those of neighboring counties, including in the sectors most affected by the law, such as retail and food service.3 In 2011, PricewaterhouseCoopers named San Francisco the third best city for opportunity in the world.4

The impact of San Francisco’s law on employers? “Minimal…. By and large, this has not been an employer issue. San Francisco’s economy is booming.”

— Jim Lazarus, senior vice president for policy, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, New York Times (January 27, 2014)

Washington, D.C.

The District of Columbia’s Accrued Sick and Safe Leave Act of 2008 took effect on May 13, 2008, extending paid sick days access to 307,000 private sector workers in D.C.5 A 2013 audit of the law by the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor found no evidence that the law prompted businesses to leave the city or discouraged employers from establishing new businesses in it.6 In 2013, buoyed by the success of the law and a
rebounding economy, the D.C. City Council passed the Earned Sick and Safe Leave Amendment Act, which expands the original law to cover an additional 20,000 tipped restaurant and bar workers.7

Connecticut
Connecticut is the only state with a paid sick days law. It took effect on January 1, 2012, and applies to about 287,000 workers.8 A recent survey of employers found that the law has had a minimal impact on costs and few employers have made adjustments such as increasing prices or reducing employee hours because of it. Employers identified several positive effects of paid sick days, including improved employee productivity and morale, and more than three-quarters expressed support for the law.9 Further, data from the state’s Department of Labor show job growth across industries since the law’s implementation, including in the leisure and hospitality industry, which was most affected.10

Seattle
Seattle’s Paid Sick and Safe Time Ordinance took effect on September 1, 2012, and covers about 450,000 workers.11 A year after the law was enacted, a small business association study found no evidence that the law had a negative impact on the economy. Seattle is located in King County and comprises 44 percent of its workforce. Since the law took effect, the county has seen stronger job growth and lower unemployment rates than Washington state and the nation, and Seattle experienced lower inflation through mid-2013 than in the year prior. There were 7,200 more retail jobs and 3,200 more jobs in food and drinking establishments in King County during the first seven months of 2013 than for the same period in 2012 and, in Seattle, sales increased during the two quarters following the ordinance’s implementation.12

More Positive Evidence on the Horizon
As the success of these policies and the benefits to workers, families, businesses and local economies have become clear, more cities across the country have passed paid sick days legislation. New York City, Portland, Ore., Jersey City and Newark, N.J., all have laws that have taken – or will take – effect in 2014, and more victories are on the horizon.


The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at www.NationalPartnership.org.

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