

Effort Renewed To Let Workers Take Paid Leave

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TRENTON, N.J. — Senators on Monday will renew efforts to make New Jersey the third state to let workers take paid leave to care for either a sick relative or new child, though businesses remain fiercely opposed to the proposal.

The Senate budget committee is scheduled Monday to consider legislation that would let workers take up to six weeks paid leave from work.

A proposal that would have let workers take 10 weeks paid leave failed to make it into law during the legislative session that ended on Jan. 8. That's after a plan for 12 weeks paid leave also stalled.

Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney, the initiative's leading backer, said he hopes the revised proposal will satisfy business concerns.

"I'm confident that this proposal will still give families of working New Jerseyans the comfort and time they need to deal with crises without disarming small businesses of the support they need to thrive," said Sweeney, D-Gloucester.

California allows workers to take up to six weeks paid leave under a 2004 law. Washington will allow workers to take five weeks paid leave as of October 2009.

Federal law has allowed workers in businesses with at least 50 employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave since 1993.

The New Jersey leave would be paid through a charge against weekly wages that legislative officials estimate would cost workers about \$1 per week. Workers who take leave would get two-thirds of their salary, up to \$502 per week, to help a sick family member or care for a newborn or adopted child.

In California, nearly 90 percent of those who have taken leave did so because of a newborn child.

"Employers still won't have to spend a dime to support the fund that would pay for the leave time," Sweeney said. "This will be a worker-funded system that will be scaled back, but still worth the effort."

But businesses contend paid leave would hurt what they describe as an already-struggling business climate and hit small businesses hard if they have to go weeks without key employees.

Jim Leonard, a New Jersey Chamber of Commerce vice president, said the group appreciates efforts to meet business concerns. But he said the efforts fall short.

"Mandated paid leave – whether it is 6 weeks or 12 weeks – interferes with the employer-employee relationship," he said. "Government should step aside and allow employers to design a benefit package that fits their employers. When has government ever known what works in the marketplace?"

He said businesses already struggle with unpaid leave.

"Why would the New Jersey Legislature force something like this down the throats of the employer community when we're in such a difficult financial situation?" Leonard asked.

Sweeney has agreed to allow businesses with less than 50 employees to tell workers taking leave that they wouldn't be guaranteed to keep their job after the leave, but he has refused to exempt small businesses.

Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine has backed the measure, citing how family members helped him after he was nearly killed in an April car accident.

"The personal experience only reinforces at a very basic fundamental level how important it is to have family with you caring for you at a time of real personal challenge," Corzine said. "People have very little choice but to take on those responsibilities. I think it's very harsh to expect that people will be able to do that and sustain themselves financially."

On the Net:

Proposed legislation: http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2008/Bills/S1000/560_I1.HTM

NJ Time to Care: <http://www.njtimetocare.rutgers.edu/>

New Jersey Chamber of Commerce: <http://www.njchamber.com/>

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