

Paid Family Leave Looms As Major Unfinished Business

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By TOM HESTER Jr.

TRENTON, N.J. — Whether New Jersey becomes the third state to let workers take paid leave to care for a sick relative or newborn child remains major unfinished business for the New Jersey Legislature.

The legislative session ends Jan. 8, when the Legislature elected in the Nov. 6 election takes office.

Bills not adopted by then die.

A bill to provide New Jersey workers with up to 10 weeks paid leave advanced through two Senate committees after lengthy debate, but has stalled, meaning efforts to pass it would have to start anew after Jan. 8 should it not be adopted.

Sen. Stephen Sweeney, the bill's sponsor, told The Associated Press in November that he was willing to cut the leave to six weeks as a compromise, but the bill hasn't budged amid continued business opposition.

Assembly Democrats recently spent more than an hour privately discussing the bill but reached no agreement.

"It was clear from the scope of discussion that we will need more time to work through some issues, such as the bill's impact on small businesses, the potential for abuse and the timing of some of the bill's provisions," said Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts Jr., D-Camden.

Roberts remained hopeful.

"These issues are surmountable, and it is my belief that a paid-family-leave insurance bill will soon become law in New Jersey," Roberts said. "It's not a question of if. It's a question of when."

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.

Senate President Richard J. Codey predicted most of the people who would take paid leave would be pregnant women.

"There's a real need for this," said Codey, D-Essex.

Indeed, in California, nearly 90 percent who took leave during the program's first year did so because of a newborn child.

But Jim Leonard, a New Jersey Chamber of Commerce senior vice president, said paid leave would impair an already-struggling business climate and hit small businesses hard if they have to go weeks without key employees.

"There have been endless references to economic growth being a top priority in Trenton," Leonard said. "But passing a mandate like paid leave does not match the rhetoric. It puts us at a competitive disadvantage because it makes us the only state east of the Mississippi to impose such an onerous mandate on companies."

He said employees can already use the federal leave program and plans offered by their employers.

"At a time when the national and state economies are in a precarious state and our business owners are already stressed, it makes no sense to make New Jersey a paid leave guinea pig for the rest of the nation," Leonard said.

Sweeney, D-Gloucester, 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 said he won't support exempting small businesses.

Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine is hopeful an agreement can be reached, saying arguments against the plan "just don't fit."

He cited how family members helped him earlier this year 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."

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