

Paid Family Leave Plan Is Good For Jersey

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EDITORIAL

New Jersey is once again on the threshold of becoming only the third state in the nation – behind California and Washington – to offer paid family leave to workers. While previous efforts to pass a law have ground to a halt, fresh legislation advanced on Monday by a Senate committee appears to offer just the right balance between the concerns of business and the needs of employees for lawmakers to offer their full support.

The bill now on the Legislature's doorstep is a scaled-down version of a measure that was turned back early last year, and a good thing it was. Lawmakers came to realize the protections some wanted – 10 full weeks of paid leave in the event of a personal emergency or family event – were too much of a burden for businesses to easily bear.

The latest iteration of paid family leave strikes a manageable compromise, granting workers six weeks of leave along with a portion of their salary to care for a newborn child or sick family member. Workers would have to use their personal and vacation time before they could tap into the program, to be financed by a payroll tax that would cost all workers an estimated \$33 a year. Businesses would pay nothing. Workers could take up to 12 weeks total to care for a family member, the same amount of time they can claim now without pay. No one – not businesses or the people they employ – would be unduly inconvenienced by the rules, or see their livelihoods threatened, despite rampant claims to the contrary.

Is the bill perfect? Not at all. But it is as close to perfection as the state can reasonably get.

It is obvious that family leave, no matter how carefully crafted, would cost employers at least something in the way of higher costs by requiring them to hire part-time or temporary help when a staffer is on leave. The policy also might pose a logistical hurdle for certain businesses forced to substitute for absent workers.

Complicating matters further, the bill would come at a time when New Jersey's economy, just as the nation's economy, is struggling mightily, possibly placing employers at a further disadvantage.

The bill is imperfect in one other respect as well: The measure wouldn't guarantee individuals employed by companies of fewer than 50 workers – or about 40 percent of New Jersey's work

force – a return to their jobs when their family leave is up, creating two classes of workers and two categories of workers' rights, a glaring inequity.

Still, the proposal's benefits easily outweigh all of those weaknesses. Businesses would gain something in the way of savings by retaining workers who might otherwise be forced to quit their jobs to tend to a pressing health emergency at home; the cost of training replacement employees is a huge expense, one that in the future would be lowered.

No one should forget either that companies would not pay workers' salaries during their absence, a savings on the bottom line.

New Jersey has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to providing family and medical leave, in 1990 becoming the first state in the nation to offer such protections on an unpaid basis. The federal government followed suit three years later when President Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which requires companies with 50 or more employees to offer such leave.

The economy didn't fold then, nor did businesses as a result of those laws. Quite the opposite was true. The '90s were one of the most prosperous decades in the history of the state and the nation.

New Jersey should become a leader among states one more time by giving all of its workers the option of taking paid family leave when a crisis hits home. A happier and more productive work force will be the result.

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