



IMPORTANCE OF THE HEALTHY FAMILIES ACT TO THE HEALTH OF AMERICAN CHILDREN



Institute for Health and Social Policy
Issue Brief II, 2007

Jody Heymann, Alison Earle & Kate Penrose

Healthy Families Act

- Nearly half of private sector workers have no paid sick days at all. An even larger percentage lack the ability to take days off to care for sick family members.
- While many families cannot reliably count on paid sick days, working poor families are at the highest risk. Seventy-six percent of low-income working parents do not consistently have paid sick days.
- The Healthy Families Act would ensure working Americans receive at least 7 paid sick days.

Sick Days' Impact on the Health of Children

- Parental availability is vital for ensuring children's physical health. Children sent to day care sick with contagious diseases exacerbate the higher rate of observed infections in day care centers, including respiratory and gastrointestinal infections. Children left home alone are unable to see physicians for diagnoses, needed medications, or emergency help if their conditions worsen.
- Parental care is important for children even when substitute sick child care is available. Studies of hospitalized children have shown that sick children have shorter recovery periods, better vital signs, and fewer symptoms when their parents share in their care. The presence of parents has also been found to shorten children's hospital stays by 31%.
- Workplace policies are essential to the ability of working parents to meet the health needs of their children. Parents who have paid sick days are more than five times as likely to be able to care for their children themselves when they get sick as parents who do not have paid sick days.

Impact on the Ability of Americans to Get Jobs, Keep Jobs, and Earn a Decent Living

- Without paid sick days, working families are placed at risk economically, experiencing wage and job loss when they take time off to provide care for family members.
- The ability of working poor mothers to keep a job is dramatically affected by the health of the mother and the health of her child. Having a health problem led to a 53% increase in job loss among low-wage mothers and having a child with health problems led to a 36% increase.

Importance to Adults as Well as to Children

- Those who will benefit from paid sick days bridge children, adults, older and disabled Americans.
- The proportion of adults having to meet the needs of elderly and disabled adult family members while working is growing and will continue to do so as the American population ages.
- When adults receive support from family members when sick, they have substantially better health outcomes from conditions such as heart attacks and strokes, and elderly individuals live longer.
- The ability of workers to address their own health needs is equally critical. Taking the necessary time to rest and recuperate when sick encourages a faster recovery and may prevent minor health conditions from progressing into more serious illnesses that require longer absences from work and more costly medical treatment. If working adults are able to stay home when they are sick, they are also less likely to spread their illness to those they work with.
- In a study of nurses, having sick days made all the difference in their ability to keep their jobs after developing heart disease or having a heart attack. Those with paid sick days were 2.6 times more likely to return to work after a heart attack or angina.

Impact on Businesses

- Offering paid sick days has positive benefits for employers, including limiting the spread of infectious diseases in the workplace by letting employees stay home when sick.
- At the same time, workplaces with paid sick days experience lower job turnover rates, leading to lower recruitment and training costs and a higher level of productivity and decreased unnecessary absenteeism.

Sick Days are Feasible while Competing in a Global Economy

- One hundred and forty-five countries guarantee paid sick days. In at least 100 countries, paid sick days begin with the first day of illness.
- By global standards, the seven days proposed in the Healthy Families Act is quite modest. One hundred and two countries guarantee 1 month or more of paid sick leave.
- The World Economic Forum, which brings together the top business leaders from around the world, has ranked the most competitive national economies. All of the 20 most competitive countries, with the exception of the United States, guarantee paid sick days, and 18 of them provide 31 or more days of paid sick leave.
- Globally, those countries which are most economically competitive are consistently more likely to guarantee paid sick days and leave for employees' own health, for the care of children's health, and to meet the health needs of other adult family members. It makes sense. If you guarantee paid sick days, you have healthier workers and a healthier next generation – both essential to competition.

For more information, please contact Stephanie Coen:
(514) 398-1534
stephanie.coen@mcgill.ca

