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Why Low-Wage Workers Need the Healthy Families Act

CLASP
Policy solutions that work for low-income people
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Over 32 million workers don't have any paid sick days.¹ If they get the flu, need to visit the doctor, or have to care for a sick child or an ailing parent, they face impossible choices between health and employment. Low-wage workers in particular — who can least afford to take unpaid leave — are also the least likely to have jobs with paid sick days.² For many of these workers, taking unpaid sick time can lead to economic instability, forgone wages, and even job loss.

To create lasting change for workers, reduce income inequality, and protect public health, federal policymakers must create a national minimum standard guaranteeing employees can earn paid sick leave. One such proposal is the **Healthy Families Act**, which will provide workers with job-protected sick time without losing wages or their job. It's time for national policy to catch up; 11 states, the District of Columbia, and 22 localities have already passed laws to provide workers access to paid sick days.³ In addition, Maine, Nevada, and Bernalillo County in NM, have passed paid time off laws that workers can use for sick time.

Low-wage workers need, but don't have, this critical benefit.

While 90 percent of workers in the highest 10 percent of wage earners have paid sick leave, only 30 percent of workers in the bottom 10 percent do.⁴ Workers without paid sick days are 3 times more likely to experience poverty,⁵ 1.4 times more likely to need state or local income supports, and 1.3 times more likely to receive SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — also known as food stamps).⁶

- **Full-time workers are much more likely to have paid sick days than part-time workers:** Only 43 percent of part-time workers have paid sick days, compared to 83 percent of full-time workers.⁷ This is a pressing issue at a time when over 4 million people are working fewer hours than they'd like and are sometimes forced to work multiple part-time jobs.⁸
- **Working parents:** In one survey, a third of parents with young children were concerned about losing pay or their job because of missing work to care for their children when they're too sick to go to child care. This problem is pervasive, with nearly two-thirds of parents reporting their children couldn't go to child care because of illness in the past year.⁹
- **Hispanic workers are disproportionately represented in occupations and industries, such as the service sector, that rarely offer paid sick days.**¹⁰ Less than half of Hispanic workers (46 percent) have paid sick days.¹¹
- **Immigrants:** Immigrants are significantly more likely to live in poverty and work in low-wage jobs, meaning they can least afford to lose wages or their job.¹² Only half of immigrants have paid sick days vs. 60 percent of their native-born counterparts.¹³

Paid Sick Days improve economic stability

- When workers lack paid sick days and must take days off without pay, it can lead to job loss.¹⁴ Many low-wage workers fall into poverty from job loss.¹⁵ Paid sick days ensure workers have job-protected leave to heal and care.
- Even a day of lost wages can interfere with paying bills or affording groceries. Because a majority of low-income mothers lose wages to care for a sick child, having paid sick leave can help families avoid economic turmoil.¹⁶
- Paid sick leave can also improve retention. One study found paid sick leave decreases the probability of a worker quitting or facing job separation by 25 percent. This was particularly true for mothers and workers without leave.¹⁷

Paid Sick Days improve health outcomes for workers and children

- Growing research indicates that paid sick days lead to an increase in preventive health screenings for adults and children¹⁸ and fewer flu cases overall.¹⁹
- Those without paid sick days are more likely to forgo or delay medical care, which has personal and public financial and health consequences. During the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, people working while sick was the primary cause for an additional 1,500 deaths and 7 million cases of the flu.²⁰
- A lack of paid sick days is associated with lower use of critical preventive services such as well-child visits and flu vaccinations.²¹
- Workers without paid sick days are also less likely to be able to afford dental care or eyeglasses, more likely to delay filling prescriptions (to save money), and more likely to have higher family medical expenses.²²

How the Healthy Families Act (H.R. 1784 /S. 840) works

- **Employees can earn up to 7 days of sick time per year.** For every 30 hours worked, an employee earns 1 hour of sick time. An employer may limit annual accrual to 56 hours, or 7 days, but can also set a higher limit. Accrued time must carry over to the next calendar year.
- **Employees may use sick time for many critical health and wellness needs:**
 - To care for their own physical or mental illness, injury, or medical condition;
 - To obtain medical diagnosis or care, including preventive care;
 - To care for a family member, including a child, parent, spouse, domestic partner, or other relative to whom the worker has a similarly close relationship;
 - To attend a school meeting or professional appointment related to a child's health condition or disability; or
 - To obtain treatment or assistance (including taking legal action) for themselves or a family member in cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.
- **Businesses with 15+ employees must provide job-protected paid sick time.** Workers in businesses with fewer than 15 employees can earn job-protected, unpaid sick days.
- **Certification:** An employer may require medical certification for 3 or more consecutive days of sick time.
- The legislation also includes important provisions to **educate workers about their rights, protect them from discrimination and retaliation**, and aid in enforcement.
- The bill **does not preempt more generous state and local paid sick time** laws that provide greater benefits and protections for low-wage workers.

For more information, please visit clasp.org/HFAlowwagework. For questions, contact jobquality@clasp.org.

Endnotes

- ¹ Number of workers in private industry with access to paid sick leave calculated using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States – March 2019,” <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>.
- ² Claudia Williams and Barbara Gault, *Paid Sick Days Access in the United States: Differences by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, Earnings, and Work Schedule*, Institute for Women’s Policy Research, March 2014, <https://iwpr.org/publications/paid-sick-days-access-in-the-united-states-differences-by-raceethnicity-occupation-earnings-and-work-schedule/>.
- ³ Some of these jurisdictions’ laws are subject to ongoing litigation. For more information on state and local paid sick days laws, see www.enforcingsickdays.org.
- ⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States – March 2019,” <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>.
- ⁵ Patricia Stoddard-Dare, LeaAnne DeRigne, Christopher Mallett and Linda Quinn (2018) How does paid sick leave relate to health care affordability and poverty among US workers? *Social Work in Health Care*, 57:5, 376-392, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2018.1447532>.
- ⁶ Patricia Stoddard-Dare, LeaAnne DeRigne, Linda Quinn, and Christopher Mallett (2018, February). Paid Sick Leave Status in Relation to Government Sponsored Welfare Utilization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000318>.
- ⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States – March 2019,” <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>.
- ⁸ “Table A-8. Employed Persons by Class of Worker and Part-Time Status,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 2019, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t08.htm> (using December 2019 seasonally adjusted data for persons working part time for economic reasons).
- ⁹ University of Michigan C.S Mott Children’s Hospital, “Struggling Kids, Struggling Parents,” C.S Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health. Vol. 16, Issue 5. October 22, 2012, <http://mottnpch.org/sites/default/files/documents/10222012ChildCareIllness.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Jenny Xia, Jeffrey Hayes, Ph.D., Barbara Gault, Ph.D., and Hailey Nguyen, *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, and Earnings*, Institute for Women’s Policy Research, February 2016, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/B356.pdf> (using data from the 2014 National Health Interview Survey). CLASP uses “Hispanic” and not “Latinx” for purposes of this fact sheet because that is the terminology in the underlying research report and data.
- ¹¹ Xia et al., *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity*.
- ¹² Alex Wang, Jeffrey Hayes, and Liz Ben-Ishai, *As Foreign-Born Worker Population Grows, Many Lack Paid Sick Days*, CLASP and Institute for Women’s Policy Research, July 2014, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/B336.pdf>.
- ¹³ Xia et al., *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity* (50 percent of male and 53 percent of female immigrants have access to paid sick days compared to 63 percent of male and 61 percent of female U.S. born workers).
- ¹⁴ Oxfam America, *Hard Work, Hard Lives*, 2013, <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/low-wage-worker-report-oxfam-america.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Stoddard-Dare et al., *Paid Sick Leave Status in Relation to Government Sponsored Welfare Utilization*.
- ¹⁶ Roberta Wyn and Victoria Ojeda, *Women, Work, and Family Health: A Balancing Act*, The Kaiser Family Foundation, April

2003, <https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2003/04/3336.pdf>.

¹⁷ Heather D. Hill, "Paid Sick Leave and Job Stability," *Work and Occupations*, 40(2), 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3825168/>.

¹⁸ LeaAnne DeRigne, Patricia Stoddard-Dare, Cyleste Collins, and Linda Quinn, "Paid Sick Leave and Preventive Health Care Service Use Among U.S. Working Adults," *Preventive Medicine* 99 (2017); Fernando A. Wilson, Yang Wang, and Jim P. Stimpson, "The Role of Sick Leave in Increasing Breast Cancer Screening Among Female Employees in the U.S." *Journal of Cancer Policy* 2 (2014); and Abay Asfaw and Maria Colopy, "Association between Parental Access to Paid Sick Leave and Children's Access to and Use of Healthcare Services," *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 60 (2017).

¹⁹ Stefan Pichler and Nicolas R. Ziebarth, "The Pros and Cons of Sick Pay Schemes: Testing for Contagious Presenteeism and Noncontagious Absenteeism Behavior," *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Papers Series* (2016), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22530.pdf>.

²⁰ Stoddard-Dare et al., How does paid sick leave relate to health care affordability.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.