

# Inaccessible and Costly: Southern Workers' Experiences with Paid Leave

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost every individual will have a serious illness or injury, act as a caregiver for a family member, or welcome a new child during their careers. Workers, advocates, and unions have long called for the passage of paid family and medical leave programs to address this need and improve the health and well-being of workers and their families.

Despite workers' needs and the known benefits of paid leave, the United States does not have a national paid leave program, making access fragmented and inequitable.<sup>1</sup> The lack of a national program is particularly damaging to workers in the South, a region with few state paid leave programs, unique barriers to organizing, and fewer workplace protections than other areas of the country, leaving Southern families less able to care for themselves and their loved ones without risking their income or job security.

Women of color are disproportionately harmed by the lack of paid family and medical leave program, and over half of the U.S. Black population lives in the South.<sup>2</sup> Overall, in 2023, only one in four civilian Southern workers had access to paid family leave.<sup>3</sup>

This report seeks to uplift the experiences of Southern workers trying to access and utilize paid family and medical leave when they welcomed a new child into their family, had a serious illness or injury, or had to care for a loved one with a serious illness or injury. The report also explores the impacts of workers' ability to access these programs in their time of need and provides policy recommendations to better address the needs of Southern workers.

The qualitative nature of this report seeks to complement the quantitative literature on paid family and medical leave and help build more literature that analyzes this policy at a regional level. We also seek to understand how the lack of access to, or the ability to access, paid leave impacts Southern workers and their families, with a commitment to worker-centered policy research.

### Key Findings

- **When life events occur, workers are left with no options.** Sixty percent of interviewed workers were either pushed out of the workplace or forced to work through caregiving demands or against medical advice.
- **Without state or federal paid family and medical leave programs and protections, a strong, legitimate fear of retaliation makes paid leave inaccessible.** Half of the workers described being uncomfortable or afraid to ask about or take paid family and medical leave, and the majority of interviewed workers experienced retaliation for needing paid leave.
- **The lack of paid family and medical leave worsens already stressful life experiences.** Financial pressure from the lack of paid leave interfered with workers'

ability to recover from childbirth, navigate a serious illness, or provide care for sick family members.

- **The inability to access paid family and medical leave leads to and exacerbates poverty.** Multiple workers reported struggling to pay their utilities and bills or accruing credit card debt because of the lack of paid leave.

## The Need for Paid Leave in the United States Often Goes Unmet

When workers or their family members fall ill or become pregnant, workers need an affordable way to take time away from their jobs to receive needed health care, heal and recover, or be a caregiver. Policies such as paid family and medical leave and paid sick days can respectively address long-term and short-term health needs for workers, allowing them to recover after childbirth or surgery, attend a doctor's appointment, or heal from an illness like COVID-19.

Yet the United States lacks a national paid family and medical leave program, and access to paid leave remains limited and inequitable. Only 27 percent of private sector workers have access to paid family leave through their employers, leaving 106 million workers without dedicated time to welcome a new child or address a loved one's health needs.<sup>4</sup>

The **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)** offers job-protected leave but does not guarantee pay, making it inaccessible for workers living paycheck to paycheck. FMLA's strict eligibility requirements, based on hours worked, length of tenure, and employer size, exclude approximately 44 percent of the workforce and disproportionately impact workers of color, as Asian American, Black, Hispanic, multiracial, Native American, and Pacific Islander workers are less likely to be eligible than their white counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of paid sick days, more than one in five workers do not have a single paid sick day in this country. Workers who are in low-wage industries or part-time jobs are among the least likely to have access, as are workers in the South, where state-level protections for private sector workers are virtually nonexistent.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of federal action, 13 states and D.C. have passed laws to create statewide paid family and medical leave programs that cover nearly all workers. Many of these programs also include safe leave, which allows survivors of domestic, sexual, or other forms of gender-based violence to take paid leave to heal, recover, and protect their families.<sup>7</sup>

Still, access remains uneven, and state programs have yet to reach most U.S. workers. This forces millions of people—particularly workers of color, workers in low-wage industries, and those in part-time roles—to choose between their health, their families, and their livelihoods.

## BACKGROUND

### Defining the American South

Definitions of the South vary widely among academics, institutions, and Southerners themselves. Historically, the region has been determined by political constructs like the Mason-Dixon Line, geographic markers such as the Ohio River, and the 36°30' parallel.<sup>8</sup> Yet the South is not defined by geography alone. It is also characterized by distinct cultural, political, and economic traits forged through a shared history. Central to this is the legacy of the Confederacy, the Civil War, and the exploitation of enslaved Black people.<sup>9</sup>

Understandings of this region therefore differ based on culture, identity, and lived experience, and as a result, there is no standard definition of the South. For the purposes of this report, the South will be defined according to the U.S. Census, which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia (D.C.), Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.<sup>10</sup>



## Paid Leave in the South

Comprehensive paid family and medical leave programs remain largely absent across the South. Only D.C., Delaware, and Maryland, the region's northernmost jurisdictions, have enacted such programs, leaving millions of Southerners without critical protections. In 2020 alone, workers in the South needed but could not take more than 4.5 million leaves.<sup>11</sup>



Historical data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics has shown that while access to paid family leave has increased in the last decade, even at its peak, only 25 percent of civilian workers in the South have had access.<sup>12</sup> Yet even this progress leaves millions of workers in the South, especially low-wage workers, unable to afford to take time off work to care for themselves or their families.<sup>13</sup> In response, Southern advocates and policymakers have worked to expand access to paid leave for their workforces. Fifteen states in the region have enacted paid parental leave programs for state government employees.<sup>14</sup> Notably, eleven of these state employee programs have passed in the last four years, and Georgia and Tennessee have expanded their programs within the past two years, reflecting growing momentum across the region.<sup>15</sup>

Years of work by the Georgia Coalition for Paid Leave, led by 9to5 Georgia, made the state the first in the South to pass paid parental leave for both state government employees and public K-12 school educators in 2021. In 2024, the policy was expanded to double the length of leave and include charter school employees.<sup>16</sup> The following year, the Tennessee Paid Leave Coalition, led by A Better Balance, secured an expansion of the state's paid parental leave policy, allowing government workers to also take paid leave to care for a family member with a serious, end-of-

life health condition.<sup>17</sup> These victories demonstrate that organized, persistent coalitions are making significant strides toward expanding paid leave across the South, even in challenging policy environments.

Despite these gains, most Southern workers still lack access to comprehensive paid family and medical leave. In Southern states without paid leave programs, more than 2.7 million leaves, about one-third of all leaves, are taken without pay each year, forcing thousands of families to go weeks or months without income.<sup>18</sup> This is unaffordable for many and leads to steep economic losses for workers. According to estimates by the Center for Law and Social Policy, **Southern workers lose approximately \$18 million in wages each year because of the lack of access to paid family and medical leave.**<sup>19</sup>

## The Value of Paid Leave for Southern Workers

Nearly every worker in the South will welcome a new child, care for a sick family member, or need time to recover from an illness or injury at some point in their lives. Strong paid family and medical leave programs and paid sick leave laws can help shape the Southern economy around this reality and improve health outcomes, reduce financial hardship, and advance equity across the region.

Access to health care is more limited in the South compared to other regions, and Southerners are less likely to have health insurance.<sup>20</sup> Medicaid helps address this, providing health insurance to 9 million people in the Deep South (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi) alone.<sup>21</sup> However, federal cuts to Medicaid are expected to disproportionately impact Southern states like Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, and West Virginia.<sup>22</sup> By giving workers time to attend doctor's appointments, recover from illness, manage chronic conditions, and care for family members, paid leave can support preventive care and mental well-being for Southern workers.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the South faces the highest infant mortality rate in the country and the lowest level of access to maternity care.<sup>24</sup> These challenges are compounded by stark racial inequities. Black individuals are more than three times as likely as white individuals to experience a pregnancy-related death, and over half of the U.S. Black population resides in the South.<sup>25</sup> Paid family and medical leave can play an essential role in addressing maternal and infant health disparities in the region. Research shows that paid leave facilitates bonding time for new parents, lowers rates of postpartum depression, and improves maternal health.<sup>26</sup> Paid leave is also linked to lower infant mortality, fewer hospitalizations, and, for seriously ill children, hospital stays that are 31 percent shorter.<sup>27</sup>

Longstanding regional inequities in the South also make it especially difficult for workers to afford time away from work. For decades, Southern workers have been paid less than workers in any other region of the country. According to the Economic Policy Institute, real median wages in the South have lagged national averages for over 40 years. Today, the South continues to

have the highest share of workers earning less than \$15 per hour, and the largest share of residents living in poverty of any U.S. region.<sup>28</sup>

These lower wages were shaped by the “Southern economic development model,” defined by weak labor protections, anti-union policies, and poor enforcement of labor standards. As a result, it is harder for workers in the region to build savings or withstand a loss of income, making unpaid leave especially unaffordable.<sup>29</sup> Yet Southern workers are often forced to take unpaid leave at enormous personal costs. **For every week they take unpaid leave, Southern workers without a state paid family and medical leave program lose approximately \$1,060 in wages.**<sup>30</sup>

This hardship is compounded by the South’s high rates of poverty. Half of the nation’s rural poor live in the South, and four of the five states with the highest child poverty rates—Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia—are located in the region.<sup>31</sup> By providing workers with a mechanism to address crucial life events without losing a paycheck, paid leave can provide a financial lifeline for millions of Southern families, helping them avoid debt, housing instability, and deepened poverty.

## METHODOLOGY

Between late 2024 and early 2025, CLASP conducted one-on-one virtual interviews with ten workers across the South to better understand their experiences needing time away from work to welcome a new child, recover from a serious illness or injury, or provide care for a loved one. The interviews explored whether participants had access to paid family and medical leave and examined how having—or lacking—such leave impacted their well-being, financial stability, and caregiving responsibilities. To identify participants, CLASP partnered with several unions, grassroots organizations, and networks based in the South. Note: The verbatim quotes in this report retain the respondents’ voices and manners of speech.

### Overview of Workers Interviewed

All ten workers had experienced a need for paid family and medical leave at least once in their lives. While they share this common need, their experiences are shaped by their own backgrounds, family responsibilities, and employment circumstances.

Geographically, the participants were located across the South. Four workers were based in Mississippi, two in Georgia, one in Louisiana, one in North Carolina, and one in Texas. One worker divided their time between Mississippi and Louisiana. Although outreach extended to other Southern states, including West Virginia and Florida, interviewees ultimately came from these five states.

The participants ranged in age from 29 to 55, spanning a variety of life stages and illustrating

that the need for paid leave can arise at any point in a person's working life. The group included eight Black workers, one Hispanic worker, and one white worker—demographics that are particularly relevant given racial inequities in job quality and access to paid leave benefits.

Three workers were employed in food service, three in health care, and one in the broader service industry. Two worked for statewide nonprofit organizations, while another held roles in both consulting and higher education. One participant was a student at the time of the interview. Notably, three of the workers held multiple jobs simultaneously to support themselves and their families.

Lastly, all the interviewees were women. This is likely due to the utilized outreach methods and a common misconception that paid family and medical leave is limited to parental leave. Because of this, individuals may have been more likely to share information about the study with women with young children. Despite this, paid family and medical leave is not exclusive to women and has been shown to improve the health and financial well-being of workers regardless of gender.

## FINDINGS

### When Life Events Occur, Workers Have No Options

Every worker interviewed needed paid family and medical leave in their career. Their experiences varied: several had high-risk pregnancies, while others faced prolonged illness or had loved ones with serious medical conditions that required caregiving. Despite their situations, none of the workers had access to guaranteed paid leave through a state or federal program. Only two workers, who were both employed at nonprofits in Mississippi, had access to paid family and medical leave through their employers. The rest were left to navigate personal and family crises without any form of wage replacement.

For these workers, there was no way to care for themselves and their families without sacrificing the income they needed to survive. **Nearly half were either pushed out of their workplaces or forced to work through caregiving demands or against medical advice.**

One Mississippi worker describes the impossible choice she faced when the father of her child became seriously ill. Without access to paid leave, she only had two choices: to leave her job and become a caregiver, or to work while he lacked needed care. "They just give you an option, you know. 'Are you going to work or not?'" While she wanted to keep her job, she had to leave her organization to care for him and their one-year-old.

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In Georgia, a state that does not provide paid family or medical leave or paid sick time, two food service workers shared how neither of their employers offer any form of paid time off.<sup>32</sup> As a result, they cannot afford to miss a shift and lose income, and **they have to work through serious illnesses or caretaking responsibilities.**

One worker has a defibrillator to regulate her heartbeat, but each time she goes to a necessary medical appointment, she loses wages. "Because I have to see my doctors," she said, "I just have to suffer the consequences." The other worker shared that without a way to take paid time away from work, her ability to be a caregiver to her family members was limited. She was unable to take time off work to care for her young son when he fell seriously ill, and when her father became fatally ill, she had to coordinate caregiving with her ex-husband. "Going back and forth," she said, "it wasn't good for him. He needed one caretaker, and ultimately in the end, I wasn't able to care for him."

Some workers tried to negotiate with their employers, but only one worker was able to reach a successful compromise. Others were met with indifference or inflexibility. One long-tenured private-sector worker in Texas was hospitalized for months after her gallbladder burst. Though her employer offered paid parental leave, they did not provide paid medical leave, and her employer's human resources department was unwilling to accommodate her. She was told to resign and reapply for her job once she recovered. "There was nothing that H.R. was willing to do," she said. The experience pushed her to leave the traditional workforce altogether. She explained, "it's better to work for yourself than work for a company that's not willing to value you."

These stories reveal more than individual hardship. Without the right to paid family and medical leave, Southern workers are left to bear the costs of care and crisis alone. Their health, job security, and financial stability are routinely jeopardized. Many are pushed out of the workforce despite their skills and experience; others are forced to work through serious illness and caregiving needs simply to hold onto a paycheck.

## A Strong and Legitimate Fear of Retaliation Makes Paid Leave Inaccessible

Without guaranteed access to paid family and medical leave, and without strong workplace protections, many Southern workers are forced to navigate a climate of fear, where even asking about time off can trigger retaliation.

Workers described feeling afraid to disclose their needs. When a housekeeper at a nursing home in Mississippi became pregnant, she chose not to ask about paid leave, terrified it would cost her her job. She knew paid leave could make a difference for her family, but she remained silent, prioritizing job security over all else. She explained, "it puts us in a position where we have to, on the back burner, not ask questions and not do things just for us to keep a job."

This fear of retaliation spanned sectors, from nonprofit organizations to food service to health

care. **Half of the workers interviewed said they worried that requesting leave, or even inquiring about it, could endanger their employment.** One nonprofit worker in Mississippi considered hiding her pregnancy because she feared it would impact her job security or future with the organization. "Missing work for family emergencies can affect your career growth," she said. She only disclosed her pregnancy after being ordered to go on bed rest.

These fears are not hypothetical. Many workers had witnessed or experienced real consequences: lost jobs, lost income, reduced hours, and workplace hostility. **Most of the interviewees had experienced some form of retaliation for needing paid family and medical leave.**



Four workers described being forced out of their jobs entirely when caregiving or health needs arose. A worker in Louisiana was pregnant when interviewing for a new job and was told in the interview process that she would have access to paid family and medical leave to give birth and care for her newborn child. But months later, when she prepared to take leave for her pregnancy, she was suddenly told she was not eligible. Unable to take unpaid leave, she left the job and returned to her previous position, which luckily had not been filled. When she resigned, she received backlash and was told that she "was stepping down in [her] career."

Another Mississippi nonprofit worker was notified by her employer that they had a paid family and medical leave program only days before she gave birth. She used the benefit, but three

weeks after returning to work, she and the only other person at her organization who had utilized the paid leave program were laid off. They were the only two workers to lose their jobs.

In Georgia, both interviewed workers experienced another form of retaliation: shift cuts. One worker shared that when she had to call out of work due to illness, she would lose shifts in the weeks afterward, and that management at her storefront routinely slashed hours for workers who advocated for better working conditions. Although she was classified as full-time, she struggled to get enough hours to meet basic expenses.

Other workers described retaliation directed at their coworkers. One pregnant coworker was visibly sick and asked to leave work. She was told, "if you go home, don't come back." She did not return. Another worker who missed a shift due to a car accident saw her hours cut in half, leaving her unable to pay her bills.

These trends reflect more than individual bad actors, but rather an ecosystem spurred on by an absence of legal protections, enforcement of existing protections, and guaranteed leave programs. Fear becomes a mechanism of control, one that keeps workers compliant and quiet even when doing so puts their health at risk.

This fear prevents workers from accessing leave, and it also suppresses their ability to change the system. In states without paid family and medical leave programs, workers must often turn to collective bargaining or union organizing to advocate for basic protections. But employer retaliation does not stop at individual leave requests—it targets organizing itself.

**Half of the workers interviewed said fear of retaliation was their primary reason for not organizing their workplaces.** One worker in Texas noted, "I think it's hard because people hear 'union' and right away, they want to get rid of you." A nonprofit worker in North Carolina had started organizing with a colleague to improve transparency and make benefits more equitable. After her coworker was abruptly fired, which was understood to be at least in part due to their organizing, she scaled back her own efforts.<sup>33</sup>

These patterns of fear, retaliation, and suppression reflect a broader failure of workplace policy and labor protections in the South. Without guaranteed paid family and medical leave or strong anti-retaliation laws, employers retain disproportionate control over workers' ability to care for themselves and their families. And by actively discouraging or punishing organizing, they block one of the few available paths to securing those protections.

## The Need for Bereavement Leave

Bereavement leave remains a critical but overlooked need for Southern workers. In our conversations, half of the interviewees mentioned the death of a family member as one of the moments when they most needed paid leave from work. Workers vulnerably shared how their grief, along with their family duties, made it incredibly difficult to return to work immediately.

For instance, a nonprofit worker in Mississippi lost her uncle to homicide. She was consumed with grief and overwhelmed by the preparations for the funeral. Yet she returned to work before she was emotionally ready. "I still have to show up and work," she said. "Because if I don't, I'mma be in the dark. My kids will be cold. We wouldn't have no running water." In Georgia, a worker with no ability to take any paid time off work could not afford to attend the funeral of a family member and be there in a moment of mourning. This strained her relationship with her family and, as a result, her mental health. She noted, "it is bad when you can't attend, you know. You can't be there for your family."

## A Lack of Paid Family Medical Leave Worsens Already Stressful Life Experiences

Life events such as welcoming a new child or caring for a loved one can be unpredictable and often bring significant emotional, physical, and logistical challenges. But without paid family and medical leave, a time that should be dedicated to healing and caregiving instead becomes a time of financial instability and impossible choices.

Interviewees stressed that the absence of paid family and medical leave turned these already difficult moments into full-blown crises. Most workers described feeling anxious about how they would afford rent, electricity, gas, and groceries while navigating these transitions. In a region where wages are lower, union protections are less common, and employer-provided benefits are not guaranteed, the added financial strain only made already overwhelming situations more stressful.

One worker in Mississippi had financially planned for her third pregnancy, intending to use short-term disability benefits. When her claim was unexpectedly denied, she was forced to scramble for alternatives while on unpaid FMLA leave. The denial impacted her paychecks but also intensified her stress during her pregnancy and left her without a stable path forward during an already vulnerable time.

Another nonprofit worker in Louisiana recounted a similar experience. Despite being told she would have access to paid family and medical leave, she later learned she was ineligible. The shock led her to break down at work. "They don't give you adequate amount of time to heal,"

she said, “without the stress of the financial burden that it’s going to cause.”

In addition, the lack of paid leave made it difficult for workers to use their time away from work as intended. Workers from Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina spoke about how **financial pressure from the lack of paid leave interfered with their ability to recover from childbirth, navigate a serious illness, or provide care for sick family members.** They were unable to solely focus on their recoveries or caring for family. Instead, they had to dedicate significant portions of this time to simply trying to figure out how they would make ends meet.

Several workers returned to work before they were ready, at times going against doctors’ recommendations. After surviving a car accident, one Mississippi worker was told by her doctors that she needed six months to recover. But without job protections and paid leave, she returned to work five months early. “Your bills don’t stop coming,” she said. “You can’t take a rest day.

For a single mother in Georgia, the absence of paid leave and paid sick days made it almost impossible to care for her own health. She worked through illnesses and medical conditions because she could not afford to lose her shifts. The long-term effects of that tradeoff were clear. “[It] makes me less of an employee,” she said. “It makes me less of a mom. It makes me less of a sister, less of an aunt. So everywhere that I’m needed in my life, I am less than.”

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## The Inability to Access Paid Leave Leads to and Exacerbates Poverty

The absence of comprehensive paid family and medical leave deepens economic hardship for workers, particularly those who are in low-wage industries. When workers cannot take paid time off to recover from illness, care for a loved one, or welcome a new child, they face a heightened risk of falling into or remaining in poverty.

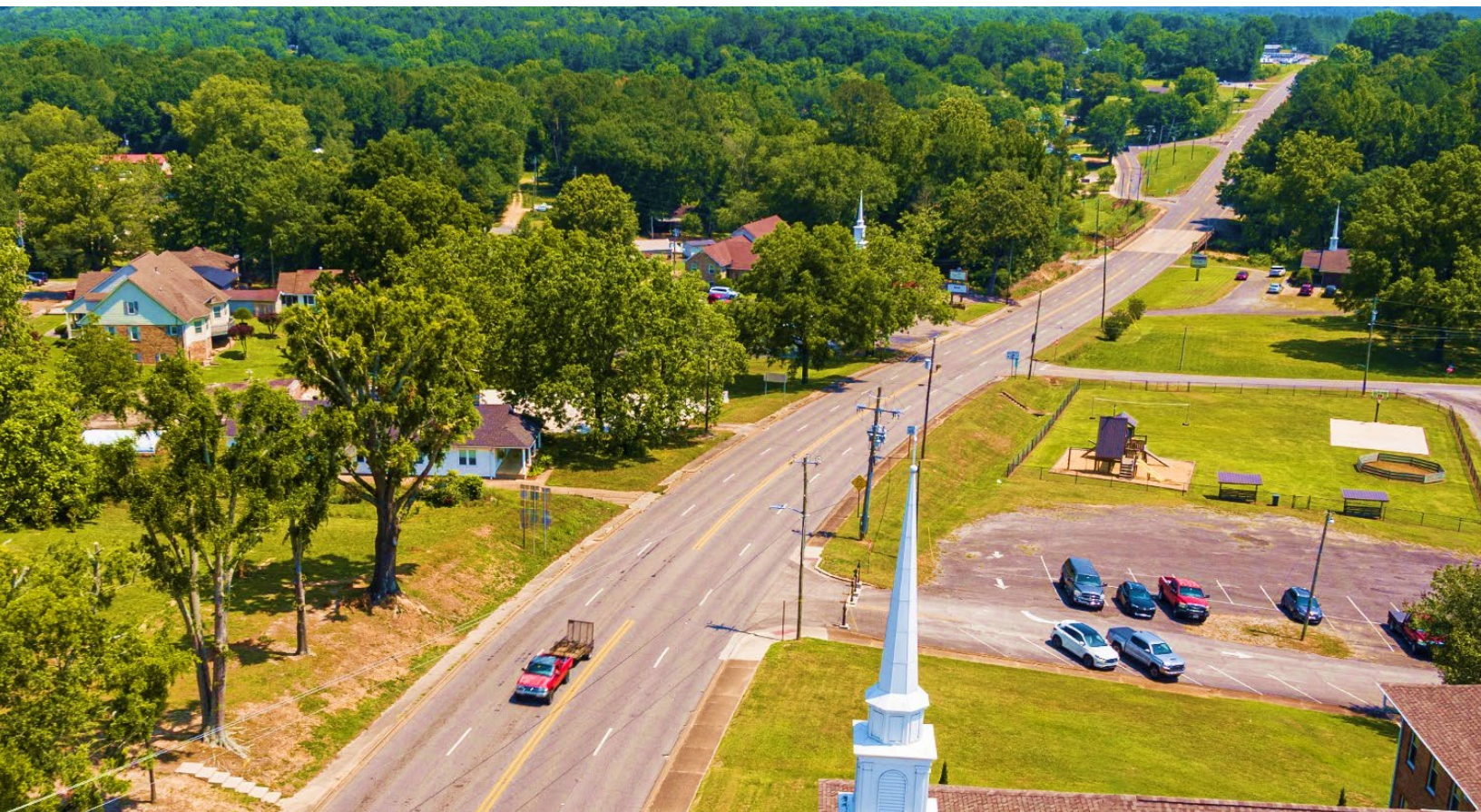
**Several interviewed workers directly connected the lack of paid family and medical leave to the financial insecurity they experienced.** Three workers described being unable to pay their bills after taking unpaid leave or unpaid time off. One health care worker based in Mississippi shared that without paid leave for her pregnancy, she tried to take as little time away from work as possible. “I automatically just assumed, okay, you gonna have to foot the bill during the time,” she said. “You also try to take the least amount of time as possible so that you able to get back to work and be able to make the income you need to feed your family.” She shared that while away from work for this pregnancy, she had to use her credit card to cover daily expenses for her family, leaving her with credit card debt that took months to pay off.

A nonprofit worker from Mississippi shared that without access to paid family and medical leave, she fell behind on her utility bills. She not only stressed about how she would recover financially, but how she would be able to afford necessities like food, internet, diapers, and access to a washing machine.

"It could push you behind. So that means now I got to go back and work double hard or find another job, second job, just to catch up from being off from having a newborn child."

Another health care worker in Mississippi shared that while she was grateful to have job protection through FMLA, she still was worried about how she would be able to pay her bills during her unpaid leave, and how these weeks without pay would impact her in the long term. She explained, "it could push you behind. So that means now I got to go back and work double hard or find another job, second job, just to catch up from being off from having a newborn child."

These experiences underscored how the lack of paid leave creates financial hardship that pushes workers deeper into debt and creates lasting financial consequences, especially for those already living paycheck to paycheck. For Southern workers, who are more likely to face low wages and lack access to employer-provided benefits, the absence of paid leave policies perpetuates a cycle of poverty.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Establishing Worker-Centered Paid Family and Medical Leave

Southern workers need a system that allows them to care for themselves and their families during critical life events without jeopardizing their jobs, income, or long-term financial security. To address these needs, particularly for workers in low-wage industries and communities of color, policymakers must pass comprehensive paid leave, tailored to the realities Southern workers face. **To be truly accessible and equitable, these programs must include job protection and anti-retaliation measures, meaningful wage replacement, and inclusive family definitions.**

Interviews with workers revealed that workers across the South lose their jobs or are asked to resign when they need extended leave from work. The fear of retaliation is prevalent in various industries and makes workers uncomfortable voicing their needs to their employers, utilizing their benefits, or asking about their rights. To ensure that workers feel comfortable using paid family and medical leave, programs must include job protection and anti-retaliation measures that protect workers from being fired, discriminated against, or retaliated against for taking or requesting to take paid family and medical leave.

Along these lines, many workers cannot afford to lose their paychecks. This challenge is particularly acute in the South, where wages are lower than in other regions, and a disproportionate share of workers earn less than \$15 an hour. Workers interviewed described how going without pay while on leave added intense stress and deepened financial hardship for their families. For workers of all income levels to be able to take the leave they need, programs must provide wage replacement for workers at a rate that makes the program accessible to workers in low-wage industries.

Paid leave programs also need to adopt inclusive definitions of family to reflect the various family structures seen in the South. In our conversation with workers, many shared their caregiving responsibilities for members of their extended family or relying on extended family for their health needs. One worker shared the pain of not being able to access paid time off after her uncle unexpectedly passed away due to her organization's rigid definition of family. Yet workers in the South are key supports to relatives and loved ones outside of the traditional nuclear family. The South has the largest share of Black residents and the second-highest share of Hispanic individuals nationwide—communities that are more likely to live in multigenerational or extended-family households compared to their white counterparts.<sup>34</sup>

## Additional Recommendations

While passing comprehensive paid family and medical leave is the most effective measure to ensure that workers across industries and incomes can access paid leave, passing such legislation faces various political challenges at both the state and federal level. For these reasons, we are providing additional recommendations that can make existing programs more accessible to workers in the South and address other unmet needs.

### *Expanding Existing Public Sector Programs*

Fifteen Southern states have implemented paid parental leave programs for state government workers, and most of these programs have passed in the last four years. In 2021, Georgia became the first Southern state to pass a paid parental leave policy for both state government workers and public K-12 school educators, and in 2024, the state doubled the length of leave and expanded eligibility to charter school employees. A year later, Tennessee broadened their program to allow government workers to take paid leave to care for a family member with a serious health condition at the end of their life.<sup>35</sup>

Policymakers across the South should follow in Georgia and Tennessee's lead and **seek to make progress by expanding existing public sector programs**. Expansion can take many forms, such as lengthening the duration of leave individuals can take. Many of the parental leave programs for state government workers in the South provide relatively short leaves for birthing parents, and even shorter leaves for non-birthing parents. It is essential for the health and well-being of families that both parents have an adequate and equal amount of time to bond with and care for a new child.

Policymakers also need to prioritize broadening the reasons workers can take leave. Parental leave is critical, but workers also need a way to take extended paid time off work to care for a loved one with a serious health condition or following their own serious injury or illness. Evidence from FMLA and comprehensive state paid family and medical leave programs shows that most workers utilize these programs for their own serious health needs, unrelated to pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>36</sup>

Eligibility rules also vary widely across these state worker programs. For example, Georgia and Mississippi extend coverage to public university employees, and Georgia's program includes public school workers. Yet these eligibility confines are too narrow, often leaving out workers who are part-time or work at the local government level, like many teachers. Future expansions should build on these successes by **covering a wider segment of the state workforce** and ensuring equitable access for all government employees.

## *Passing Paid Sick Days for All*

Despite recent progress, many workers across the South still lack access to paid sick days and cannot take paid time off when they fall ill, need to attend medical appointments, or must care for a loved one with a short-term illness. Workers interviewed for this report who did not have paid sick leave described feeling the financial strain every time they needed time off but were unable to take it.

At the individual and family level, workers must have a way to address short-term health needs without jeopardizing their financial security. From a public health standpoint, workers should be encouraged to heal and recover to protect their own health and to prevent putting others at risk. For these reasons, **policymakers should make paid sick days accessible to all workers.**

## *Implementing Paid Bereavement Leave*

Finally, policymakers should make **paid bereavement leave accessible to more workers.** When asked about a time when they needed paid family and medical leave, nearly half of the interviewed workers shared being unable to work after losing a family member. Unfortunately, grieving a loved one is another major life event that is often unaccommodated in the workplace, yet impacts the mental and financial well-being of workers.

# CONCLUSION

Without a national paid family and medical leave program and with limited programs at the state level in the South, too many workers in the region have no avenue to care for themselves and their families without risking their financial well-being. Without the ability to take time off when it is most needed, workers are forced into impossible choices that jeopardize their livelihoods, their well-being, and the care their families deserve.

The consequences are predictable and preventable: economic hardship, worsened health outcomes, and deepening inequities—particularly for Black women and other women of color who are already navigating systemic barriers in the South.

By enacting strong, comprehensive, and worker-centered paid leave programs at the state and federal levels, policymakers can shape the Southern economy to meet the needs of its workforce. This includes building in job protection, meaningful wage replacement, anti-retaliation measures, and inclusive definitions of family, while also advancing broader labor protections and wage standards.

## \* **DISCLAIMER**

Since this report's publication, Southern states have made progress on paid family and medical leave. In March 2026, Virginia's General Assembly passed a comprehensive paid family and medical leave policy, and Tennessee's legislature expanded the state's public sector paid parental leave policy. This report is in the process of being updated to recognize these historic wins.

To learn more about the recent effort in Virginia, please visit this [CLASP resource](#). To learn more about the bill passage in Tennessee, please refer to ABB's press statement.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Leaves Needed But Not Taken in the South in 2020**

State	Leaves Needed But Not Taken in 2020
Alabama	168,000
Arkansas	104,000
Delaware	
Florida	800,000
Georgia	430,000
Kentucky	148,000
Louisiana	195,000
Maryland	
Mississippi	119,000
North Carolina	400,000
Oklahoma	153,000
South Carolina	177,000
Tennessee	259,000
Texas	1,244,000
Virginia	62,000
West Virginia	339,000
DC	
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,598,000</b>

Source: "CLASP's Working People Need Access to Paid Leave." Section: Number of leaves needed not taken in 2020.

## Table 2: Number of Leaves Taken Without Pay in Southern States by State

State	Leaves Taken Without Pay in 2020
Alabama	114,000
Arkansas	79,000
Delaware	
Florida	456,000
Georgia	244,000
Kentucky	109,000
Louisiana	122,000
Maryland	
Mississippi	78,000
North Carolina	253,000
Oklahoma	103,000
South Carolina	118,000
Tennessee	181,000
Texas	640,000
Virginia	196,000
West Virginia	42,000
DC	
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,735,000</b>

Source: "CLASP's Working People Need Access to Paid Leave." Section: Number of Leaves Taken Without Pay by State and Type of Leave, 2020.

### Table 3: Percent of Leaves Taken Without Pay in the South in 2020

State	Percent of Leaves Taken Without Pay 2020
Alabama	33.9
Arkansas	34.1
Delaware	
Florida	31.0
Georgia	30.9
Kentucky	33.3
Louisiana	35.0
Maryland	
Mississippi	36.4
North Carolina	33.4
Oklahoma	32.0
South Carolina	31.5
Tennessee	34.6
Texas	28.4
Virginia	27.9
West Virginia	30.4
DC	
<b>Total</b>	<b>32.0</b>

Source: "CLASP's Working People Need Access to Paid Leave." Section: Percent of Leaves Taken Without Pay by State and Type of Leave.

## Table 4: Total Wages Lost in the South Due to Unpaid or Partially Paid Leave in 2023

State	Total Wages Lost Due to Unpaid or Partially Paid Leave by State and Type of Leave, 2023
Alabama	752,221,000
Arkansas	468,452,000
Delaware	
Florida	2,757,952,000
Georgia	1,691,008,000
Kentucky	611,420,000
Louisiana	849,646,000
Maryland	
Mississippi	371,792,000
North Carolina	1,690,836,000
Oklahoma	645,429,000
South Carolina	681,666,000
Tennessee	1,179,949,000
Texas	4,632,817,000
Virginia	1,356,853,000
West Virginia	259,102,000
DC	
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,949,143,000</b>

Source: "CLASP's Working People Need Access to Paid Leave." Section: Total Wages Lost Due to Unpaid or Partially Paid Leave by State and Type of Leave, 2023.

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<sup>12</sup> "Employee Benefits," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>13</sup> "Employee Benefits," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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