

ISSUE BRIEF

**ECONOMIC AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF PAID SICK DAYS**

The CDC (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) urges workers who are sick to stay home in order to limit the spread of infection<sup>1</sup>. However, workers without paid sick leave often go to work sick because they need the earnings and because they fear employer penalties, including job loss, if they are absent. This results in the spread of disease with damaging impacts on health, health care costs, and to employer productivity. A CDC study of the 2009-2010 H1N1 pandemic found that infected employees who reported to work were likely to have caused the infection of an additional 7 million people and 1,500 deaths<sup>2</sup>.

Those who earn lower wages are most likely to lack paid sick leave, and tend to work in restaurants, hotels, retail stores, nursing homes, and child care facilities – sites of significant public interaction<sup>3</sup>. According to a recent analysis of Louisiana worker access to sick leave, 41% (721,207) of all workers lack access to paid sick days. This is a sizable number of workers possibly spreading illnesses to coworkers and customers. Particularly concerning is the finding that 82% of LA workers in “Food Preparation and Serving” lack paid sick days<sup>4</sup>. This concern is well-founded since a national survey of restaurant workers revealed that 63% of those lacking paid sick leave admitted to cooking and serving food while sick<sup>2</sup>. These striking findings highlight the health vulnerabilities of Louisianans—and visitors to this state.

In contrast, access to paid sick days benefits workers, families, employers, and public health—and lessens health care costs. When sick workers stay home, they aid their recoveries, decrease the spread of illness to others, and reduce costly emergency room visits<sup>3</sup>. Paid leave provides income continuity and lowers the financial stress of individuals and families—which itself can promote health. Having paid leave to care for sick children improves their health and wellbeing and lessens sick children going to child care and school and spreading illness<sup>5</sup>. These reductions in the spread of disease and emergency room visits yield dramatic savings in health care costs<sup>6</sup>.

For employers, the benefits of implementing a paid sick leave law have been found to outweigh the costs of doing so. Use of paid sick days lessens workforce absenteeism (due to curtailing transmission of infection) and turnover costs (through promoting employee retention), and enhances workplace productivity (in reducing the impaired work of sick employees)<sup>3,9</sup>. Recent studies of the effects of sick leave laws in several cities and the state of Connecticut, show that a high majority of employers support the laws and that they are compatible with economic growth<sup>7</sup>. The earnings continuity that paid sick days enables also benefits the local economy since workers and their families are able to continue to buy products and services<sup>9</sup>.

For all these reasons, a Paid Sick Leave law in Louisiana is a needed “win-win” policy: it would significantly promote the health and wellbeing of all workers and their families, improve public health, dramatically lessen health care costs, benefit employers, and have positive impacts on the Louisiana economy.

*This brief was prepared by Phyllis Raabe, Ph.D., Adjunct Professor, Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and Mary Amelia Women’s Center*

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