

Paid Sick Leave Means Healthier Texans

A common-sense policy to improve public health

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Texas invests in many public health programs to reduce the spread of diseases and sickness. Despite this investment, the state still has an estimated 4.3 million workers – 40 percent of the total workforce – who are not covered by paid sick leave policies at work.¹ These common-sense policies allow workers to stay home and prevent the spread of illness when sick, without having to worry about losing wages. Paid sick leave policies are important to public health in our communities as their effects reach far beyond individual workers.

The state contributes to public health by funding state health agencies, and many businesses provide their employees the ability to stay home when sick. It's not enough, however, if only 60 percent of the workforce has access to paid sick leave. It's time the remaining businesses in our state assure the health and wellness of Texans by allowing workers to take time off to recover when sickness strikes them or their families. No one who is sick or caring for a sick family member should have the added financial stress of losing a paycheck.

Public Health Matters

Texans and businesses alike benefit from the state's many public health programs and policies. For example, the state supports programs that track and prevent the spread of diseases like tuberculosis, ensure the air is clean to breathe, and local governments enforce laws such as indoor smoking bans. These public programs and policies ensure all Texans are well and capable of contributing to a strong Texas economy. In the same way, many businesses have already recognized the value in offering paid sick leave policies. They have found that supporting the health of their workforce makes financial sense and allows them to operate successfully.

Public health is essential to quality of life, and Texans have widely embraced public policy that supports that. While the state has failed to pass workplace smoking bans, 104 Texas communities have stood up for health in the workplace by passing smoke-free workplace laws.² Additionally, public policies like the State's health code which, while requiring businesses to spend resources to adhere to health standards, works to reduce food borne illnesses. Finally, the Texas Legislature makes a valuable investment by appropriating approximately \$780 million³ per year funding the Department of State Health Services to operate programs that treat and prevent the spread of disease across the state.

Supporting communities and state policies that promote public health is crucial to building a strong Texas that is able to compete both domestically and globally while providing an environment that supports a healthy life for all Texans.

Risk of Spreading Illness

4.3 million Texas workers can't access paid sick leave, meaning they are more likely to contribute to the spread of illness by having to go to work sick. Studies have found that people without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report going to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection.⁴

Research also shows that access to paid sick leave is associated with a higher probability of staying home for an employee's own illness or injury, flu-like illness, and for a child's illness or injury across genders, races, ethnicities, incomes, and education levels.⁵ The research found that access to paid sick days is likely to reduce

the spread of disease in workplaces by increasing the rate at which sick employees stay home from work, and reduce the economic burden of staying home on families, women, and people of color.⁶

Paid sick leave policies become especially important when it comes to workers who care for vulnerable populations, such as those in hospitals, senior care, or child care. Ensuring workers in these fields can take time off when sick means our loved ones in their care will not be put at risk.

Workers in high public contact jobs are among those with the lowest rates of access to paid sick leave. Nationally, only 19 percent of food preparation and service related jobs have access to paid sick leave, followed by personal care service workers at 25 percent.⁷ In a survey of Houston restaurant workers, 63 percent reported cooking or serving food while sick because they did not have paid sick leave.⁸ Low paid sick leave coverage within jobs that require frequent contact with the public creates a greater public health concerns due to increased risk of contagion. Paid sick leave policies are crucial to keeping our workplaces and the public safe.

Threats to Children

Paid sick leave policies benefit workers and their children as well. Close to a million Texas children live in single-parent households with income at or below the official poverty measure of \$16,910 for a family of two per year. That number expands to 1.6 million, nearly a quarter of all Texas children, when you include children in single-family households with twice the amount of income at \$32,920. At such low levels of income, single parents cannot afford to take unpaid time off work to take care of a sick child, or risk losing a job when they do.

Studies show that workers without paid sick days are more likely to delay needed medical care for their family members – including their children.⁹ Parents without paid sick days are also more than twice as likely as parents with paid sick days to send a sick child to school or day care.¹⁰ This means children are forced to go to school sick where they are unlikely to learn, and where they risk infecting other students and staff. It also means children are less likely to receive newborn, well-baby, and annual check-ups when their parent can't take them to a medical provider during normal business hours. Parents are five times more likely to report taking their child or a family member to the emergency room because they were unable to take time off work during regular business hours.¹¹

When children don't receive adequate care, the repercussions are long lasting. They may face higher risk of chronic conditions that, if left untreated, inhibit their ability to transition from education to the workforce.¹² These effects are not just problems for children or their families, they effect the future strength of our state. Poor public health for children has long lasting repercussions.

Importance of Preventive Care

Public policies supporting paid sick leave don't just help prevent the spread of illness; they also play a vital role in preventing diseases that impact workers' productivity. Analyses of the National Health Interview Survey data found that having access to paid sick leave is predicted to be associated with better self-reported health, a lower likelihood of delaying medical care, and lower likelihood of emergency department use, even after controlling for demographic factors and chronic health conditions.¹³ Workers without paid sick leave may put off doctor appointments or medical treatment because they either cannot miss work due to financial implications of a reduced paycheck or threat of losing their job.

Additionally, delaying medical care can aggravate chronic health conditions or increase the severity of critical health conditions or injuries. Access to paid sick days means workers with chronic conditions can take time off to get primary and preventive care – keeping them healthier and preventing unnecessary and expensive hospital visits. A recent study found that nationally 1.3 million emergency room visits, half of which were Medicare and Medicaid, could have been avoided if all Americans had access to paid sick leave.¹⁴ For workers without paid sick leave, and the family members who rely upon them, promptly or regularly addressing health needs may be impossible due to an inability to take time off work. Paid sick leave allows workers to address their own medical

needs and those of their family without resorting to emergency room use or waiting until their condition becomes more severe.

Financial Stability Contributes to Public Health

Another important contributor to good public health is financial stability. When families have the resources to purchase nutritious food and medications that keep them healthy, and can afford a safe home, they are able to be healthy and productive members of our communities. Financial stability allows families to make better health decisions because they can better predict the size of each paycheck and plan accordingly. When households do not have access to paid sick leave, they are 30 to 40 percent more likely to receive various types of public assistance such as housing, food, or child care.¹⁵

Low-paid workers are far less likely than higher earners to have access to paid sick leave.¹⁶ When low-income earners have to take unpaid leave, they are put at risk of exposure to unfavorable health consequences, such as deciding between paying rent or for medications that keep them healthy and able to continue to work. This means that those who can least afford to take an unpaid day off are also least likely to be covered. A wage-earning parent taking unpaid leave for 3.5 days is equal to approximately that household's entire monthly grocery budget.¹⁷

We all do better when we are healthy and productive. Unfortunately, not enough Texans are given the opportunity to be their healthiest and most productive because they lack the ability to go to the doctor or stay home from work while they're sick. With more than 40 percent of Texas workers lacking access to paid sick leave, and low-income and part time workers are disproportionately affected, it's time we take an important step forward in our efforts to achieve high levels of public health by ensuring all working Texans have access to paid sick leave.¹⁸

For more information or to request an interview, please contact Oliver Bernstein at bernstein@cphp.org or 512.823.2875.

About CPHP

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¹ Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Access to Paid Sick Time in Texas*. March 2017.

² [Smoke Free Texas](#)

³ [Texas General Appropriations Act for the 2018 -19 Biennium](#)

⁴ Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Paid Sick Days Improve Public Health*. October 2018.

⁵ K. Piper, A. Youk, A. James III, & S. Kumar. *Paid sick days and stay-at-home behavior for influenza*. PLoS ONE, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, and Earnings*. February 2016.

⁸ Restaurant Opportunities Center of Houston, *Behind the Kitchen Door: Extreme Inequality and Opportunity in Houston's Vibrant Restaurant Economy*. November 2015

⁹ Miller, K., Williams, C. & Yi, Y. *Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits*. Institute for Women's Policy Research publication. November 2011.

¹⁰ Smith, T., & Kim, J. (2010, June). *Paid Sick Days: Attitudes and Experiences*. National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the Public Welfare Foundation Publication.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Yeo, Michele and Susan Sawyer. *Chronic Illness and Disability*. BMJ (Clinical research ed.) vol. 330,7493 (2005): 721-3.

¹³ Miller, K., Williams, C. & Yi, Y. *Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits*. Institute for Women's Policy Research publication. November 2011.

¹⁴ Miller, K., Williams, C. & Yi, Y. *Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits*. Institute for Women's Policy Research publication. November 2011.

¹⁵ Stoddard-Dare, Patricia, et al., *Paid sick leave status in relation to government sponsored welfare utilization*. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 2018.

¹⁶ Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, and Earnings*. February 2016.

¹⁷ Elise Gould, Kai Filion, and Andrew Green. *The Need for Paid Sick Days: The lack of a federal policy further erodes family economic security*. *Economic Policy Institute*. June 2011.

¹⁸ Institute for Women's Policy Research. *Access to Paid Sick Time in Texas*. March 2017.