

Expand Paid Family and Medical Leave

A policy action to Advance Long and Productive Lives

Issue

Given increases in life expectancy, most individuals will need to work longer to achieve financial security for extended retirement years. Further, many older individuals desire the meaning, social connections, and structure of employment. Older workers bring unique attributes to the workplace, including a wealth of experience, nuanced knowledge, and reliability. At the same time, many older workers have to cope with chronic health conditions as well as caregiving demands at home. These realities create strain for older workers. Some step out of the workforce prematurely or temporarily to manage these issues, and they find it difficult to return to work.¹

The United States is the only developed nation without paid family leave.² In the face of the aging of our population, the “greying of the workforce,” and the predicted labor shortages in some industries, paid family and medical leave is a necessary response to ensure positive outcomes for individuals, families, and employers. For the individual and family, paid leave can ensure physical, mental, and financial health as well as reduce caregiver stress. For employers, it can ensure a more stable and productive workforce.

This statement identifies action steps that can help to ensure that older workers will continue to work while simultaneously meeting their own health and services needs as well as those of the people they care for.

Action

The following action steps can help to expand paid family leave:

- More states and cities should adopt paid family-leave legislation. To date, only California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia have passed and implemented legislation.³
- Pressure should be placed on legislators in Congress to reintroduce, deliberate on, and enact the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, which would ensure national coverage.⁴
- Educate businesses on the logistics and outcomes of providing paid family-leave benefits.
- Document the specific effects of paid leave on older workers.

Evidence

A compelling body of research documents the multiple benefits of paid family and medical leave for children and parents. Improving the well-being of children and younger adults is important to achieving positive health and financial outcomes in later life. Fewer studies have focused specifically on older workers, but some research has documented positive effects on caregivers. Finally, research supports the beneficial effects of paid leave on businesses. Paid leave helps in the following ways:

- Paid leave bolsters children’s health and academic performance, improving their chances to live successful and productive lives and strengthening men’s bond to children, spouses, and parents.⁵ Women who received paid family leave are more likely to return to their employer and have improved mental health outcomes, when compared with women who took unpaid family leave.⁶
- Paid leave improves mental and physical health, and alleviates workplace stress among caregivers.⁷
- Paid leave secures economic resources and talent for employers. Among businesses that offer paid family-leave benefits, turnover rates are reduced while recruitment and retention rates are increased. Businesses generally report positive or neutral experiences in states that have enacted legislation.⁸ And expanding paid leave at the state or federal level helps small businesses compete with larger companies that can afford to offer this benefit.⁹

End Notes

1. Greenfield (2013); Gonzales, Lee, and Brown (2015); Lee, Tang, Kim, and Albert (2015a, 2015b); Wakabayashi and Donato (2006).
2. Gault, Hartmann, Hegewisch, Milli, and Reichlin (2014).
3. Campaign for DC Paid Family Leave (2016); Department of Labor (2015); Universal and Unpaid Leave Amendment Act of 2016.
4. Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act (2015a).
5. National Partnership for Women & Families (2012; 2015).
6. Chatterji and Markowitz (2012); Council of Economic Advisors (2014); Waldfogel, Higuchi, and Abe (1999).
7. Earle and Heymann (2011).
8. National Partnership for Women & Families (2015b).
9. Appelbaum and Milkman (2011).

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About this policy action

This policy action statement was developed by members of the network engaged in the Grand Challenge to Advance Long and Productive Lives. The Grand Challenges initiative's policy action statements present proposals emerging from Social Innovation for America's Renewal, a policy conference organized by the Center for Social Development at Washington University in collaboration with the [American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare](https://www.aasw.org/), which is leading the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative to champion social progress through a national agenda powered by science.

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