

The Skanner
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Paid Family Leave: A Great Gift for Oregon Moms (and Dads)

By all means, send cards and flowers on Mother's Day.

But what moms (and dads) really need is Paid Family Leave Insurance. It would be a vital step in addressing today's changed family and economic landscapes.

One measure of those transformations came to light earlier this year, when the U.S. Labor Department announced that, for the first time ever, women outnumbered men on the nation's payrolls. To some extent, that news is worthy of celebration of our nation's progress toward gender equality.

Sadly, though, that milestone is also the product of economic necessity. After adjusting for inflation, the typical Oregon man's wages have fallen by more than \$3 an hour over the past three decades. Adding to families' woes, the costs of health care, transportation, housing and childcare have all gone up. Just to stay afloat, more families today depend on a second paycheck.

That means that more breadwinners today must juggle work and family responsibilities. In 2006-07, among nearly two-thirds of the nation's married couples with children, both parents worked outside the home. Among single mothers, 73 percent were employed. For single fathers, the rate was 85 percent.

So what happens to these households when work and family responsibilities collide? What happens when a serious illness strikes a child or an elderly parent, requiring attention?

What happens when a newborn arrives?

Under such circumstances, both the federal Family and Medical Leave Act and the more expansive Oregon Family Leave Act grant some, but not all, workers the right to take unpaid time off. In other words: tend to your family, but good luck covering the rent, groceries and other bills.

For households living on the edge, or close to it, time off without pay -- even if the breadwinner is legally entitled to it -- is practically meaningless. Some employers offer some type of paid leave that can be used to deal with family emergencies. But the workers most in need of paid leave, low-wage workers, are the least likely to enjoy such benefits.

Fortunately, efforts are underway in Oregon to resolve the harsh predicament facing many working families. Time to Care for Oregon Families, a growing statewide coalition, is calling for enactment of Paid Family Leave Insurance in Oregon. Their bottom line is that no one should be forced to choose between their family and their job.

The legislation proposed by Time to Care for Oregon Families would provide up to six weeks of paid time off after the birth or adoption of a new child, or when a family member is seriously ill. The insurance would be funded by a 2-cent-per-hour payroll deduction from eligible employees' paychecks.

Paid Family Leave Insurance would not only protect many working families but also may benefit their employers' bottom line. Paid family leave could help productivity because it may improve employee morale and lower turnover and absenteeism.

Oregon small businesses, in particular, might come out ahead as a result of Paid Family Leave Insurance. By offering a benefit to their employees that employers can't afford on their own, the program could help small businesses compete with bigger companies for talented employees.

If the efforts of the Time to Care for Oregon Families coalition prove successful in the 2011 legislative session, Oregon families will get a great gift, especially if it arrives in time for next year's Mother's and Father's Days.

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