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## Proposal expands family leave act

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With two small boys at home and her husband serving with the Marines in Japan, Amy Stayrook doesn't have many options when one of her kids gets sick.

She takes unpaid time off from her part-time job at the Columbia Center mall.

"When my kids are sick, I have to take time off to be with them, unless my mom happens to have the day off. Then, I can leave them with her," said Stayrook, a Kennewick resident.

A pair of bills before the Legislature this session would impose a small new tax on Washington's workers so new parents and others who have to spend more than a week away from work can deal with family emergencies and receive a small stipend.

Senate Bill 5420 and a companion version introduced in the House build on the federal Family Medical Leave Act of 1993.

The federal law gives some workers unpaid leave at the birth or adoption of a child, to recover from a serious medical condition or to care for a seriously ill relative. It covers about 55 percent of American workers, said sponsors of the bill now under consideration in Olympia.

The Washington bill would expand the medical leave act by providing workers with a small paycheck for a portion of the time they take off to deal with medical emergencies in their families. The bill also would cover more workers than are now covered by federal benefits.

If it becomes law, the bill would create an insurance program that would provide a small paycheck for working women while they recover from childbirth, workers who need time to set up care systems for elderly parents and others contending with time-consuming illnesses in their families.

"It allows workers to take a little bit of time to take care of emergencies at home," said Catherine Ruckelshaus of the National Employment Law Project, which is lending its support to a handful of states that have ventured into the paid family-leave arena.

The Senate version is based on a proposal developed by the Economic Opportunity Institute in Seattle and would raise money to pay workers through a new, though modest, payroll tax.

The proposal calls for a 1 cent per hour tax on working Washingtonians and a matching tax on their employers, which comes to a maximum of \$1.60 per full-time employee every two weeks.

The annual cost to employers would be about \$20 per employee, or \$2,000 for a business with 100 workers, per year. The program would be administered by the state Department of Labor and Industries in tandem with the state's existing unemployment insurance program.

Workers under the family leave insurance program could file for benefits after missing one week of work and could claim \$250 per week for up to five weeks. That's slightly less than they would earn at Washington's minimum-wage rate. Part-time workers would receive a prorated amount. Since everyone would pay the same premium, everyone would receive the same benefit.

The \$250 figure is tied to Washington's minimum wage, which is in turn indexed to inflation. The amount also was conceived to ensure no one taking family leave would earn more for not working.

Stayrook, who spent the past week at home nursing herself back to health, said she would welcome a program that provides some support when workers have to take more than a few days off to deal with family crises.

"I think it would be great to have something even if it is just around minimum wage," she said.

The current federal medical leave act covers public employees and those who work for private companies with 50 or more workers. It provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to workers who become parents or who must attend to serious illnesses for themselves or immediate family members. It does not provide financial compensation for lost wages.

According to the Economic Opportunity Institute, almost half of U.S. workers aren't covered by family leave laws because their employers are too small or they haven't worked in their jobs long enough to qualify. Of those who are covered, many don't take advantage of family leave because they can't afford to go without a paycheck, said Marilyn Watkins, who directs the Economic Opportunity Institute's efforts to promote programs that support workers.

According to the institute's statistics, about two-thirds of workers who need - but don't take - family leave say they work through family emergencies because they can't afford to sacrifice a paycheck.

The institute estimates 24,000 workers who were eligible to take leave in 1999 did not because they could not afford the lost wages.

The proposed family leave insurance plan for Washington would provide replacement wages after a one-week waiting period and would allow workers to take leave to care for a child, spouse, parent or in-law. The federal law does not include in-laws. No provision is cast in stone.

"There's plenty of things in the bill that could be lopped off," Ruckelshaus said.

The Senate version of the bill was first read Monday and was referred to the Committee on Labor, Commerce and Financial Institutions. The House version, HB 1185, was first read Friday and was referred to the House Committee on Commerce and Labor.