

Who can stay home with the flu?

Swine flu, bird flu, SARS – what's next? Americans need paid sick days

BY MARILYN WATKINS, PH.D.

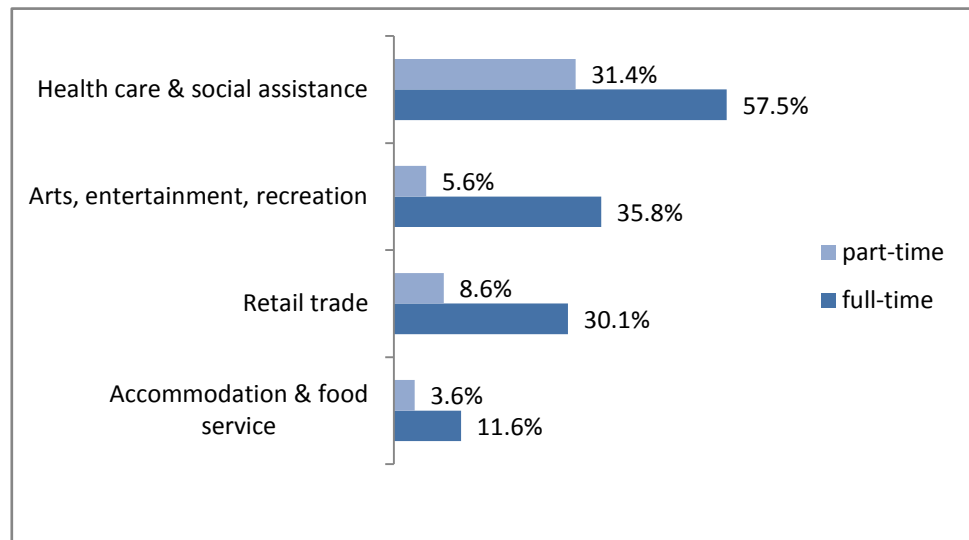
As fears of a swine flu pandemic spread, President Obama and public health officials are urging Americans to stay home from work and keep their children home from school if they have flu symptoms. But nearly 4 in 10 private sector workers lack even one paid sick day, and many more face disciplinary action if they do call in sick.¹ In a world where diseases mutate and spread across the globe in weeks, Americans need paid sick days to protect our health and our economy.

In Washington State who *can't* stay home?

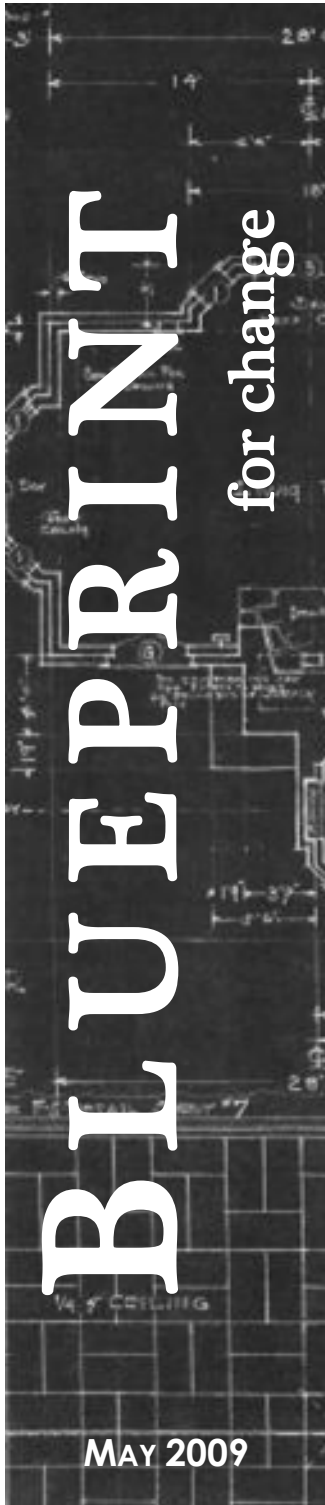
- More than 1 million workers won't get paid if they stay home sick.²
- Most workers who handle food and meet the public have no paid leave.
- Women are less likely to have sick leave, because they are concentrated in the jobs least likely to provide it, and they more often work part time.³
- Low-income parents are particularly unlikely to have paid leave. Nationally, two-thirds of women below 200% of the federal poverty level don't get paid when they miss work to care for a sick child.⁴

PERCENTAGE OF WASHINGTON EMPLOYERS PROVIDING SICK LEAVE

SELECTED INDUSTRIES, 2008

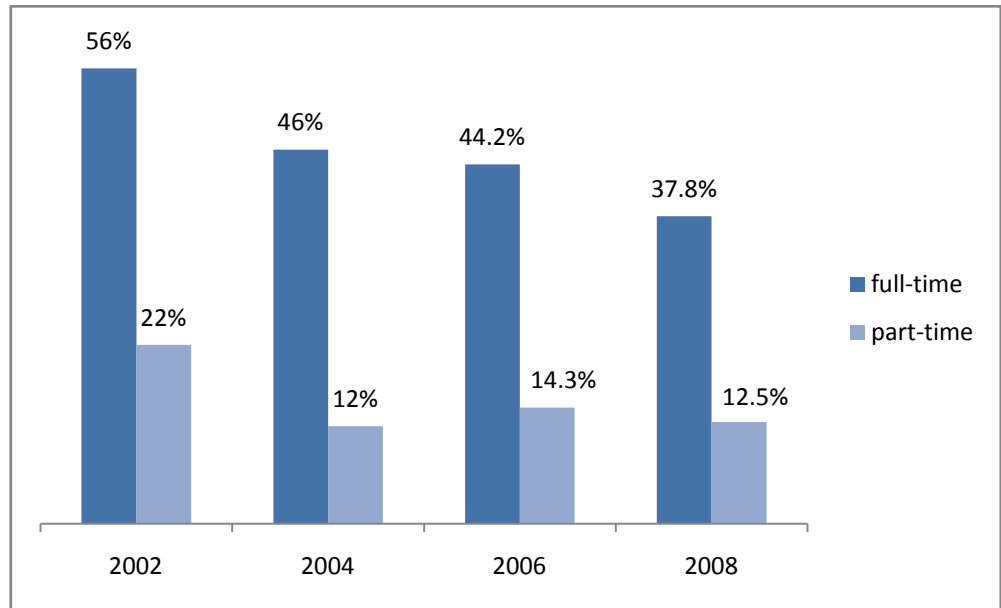


Source: Washington Employment Security Department, Employee Benefits Survey



The percentage of firms providing paid sick leave in Washington has declined since 2002. Very few companies provide paid leave benefits to part-time workers.⁵

PERCENTAGE OF WASHINGTON EMPLOYERS PROVIDING SICK LEAVE



Source: Washington Employment Security Department, Employee Benefits Survey

Who *can* stay home with the flu?

San Francisco, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. have adopted new workplace standards that require all employers to provide a few paid sick days a year – just like all employers must pay minimum wage and follow health and safety codes.

Sick days are popular with voters. San Francisco's ordinance was adopted by initiative in November 2006 with over 60% of the vote.⁶ Milwaukee voters approved their sick days law by an even higher margin – 69% – in November 2008.⁷

San Francisco's provisions include:⁸

- Employees accrue 1 hour of sick leave for every 30 hours worked after 90 days on the job.
- Employees in companies with fewer than 10 employees can accrue up to 40 hours of sick leave (5 full-time days).
- Workers in larger companies can accrue up to 72 hours (9 full-time days).

New York may become the next major city to adopt paid sick days. Congress and at least 13 states are considering adopting minimum paid sick leave standards in 2009.⁹ Sick leave legislation was introduced in Washington State in 2003 and 2006.

MILWAUKEE
VOTERS
APPROVED THEIR
SICK DAYS LAW
BY A MARGIN OF
69%.

Paid sick days will cure more than the flu

The U.S. economy is showing signs of recovery, but a widespread swine flu outbreak that shutteres businesses, stops travel, and wipes out tourism will plunge us deeper into recession. The epidemic has already brought the Mexican economy to its knees and has closed schools from Seattle to New York. Paid sick days standards will help stop swine flu – and future pandemics – in their tracks. Universal access to paid sick days will protect our health and improve our economy in multiple ways:

- Children recover more quickly from illness and do better in school when their parents have access to paid leave.¹⁰
- Hospital stays are shorter when patients have a loved one present, reducing health care costs.¹¹
- Family economic security is strengthened with paid sick leave.

Numerous studies also show **providing paid sick days is good for business:**

- Employees are more likely to stay home when sick, so they recover more quickly.
- Employees who do come in sick are less productive, can cause workplace accidents, and spread disease to co-workers.¹²
- “Presenteeism” – coming to work sick – costs U.S. companies as much as \$150 billion each year, possibly more than direct health costs.¹³

An independent evaluation of San Francisco's paid sick leave policy showed that job growth in San Francisco equaled or surpassed growth in surrounding counties in the year after implementation.¹⁴ Another study, based on interviews with employers who were required to change policies, found that most were able to adjust with minimal impacts on their business.¹⁵

Conclusion

In the absence of minimum workplace standards, calls for people to stay home with the flu will have little effect. Most families today can't afford to miss a paycheck. With unemployment rising, few workers are willing to risk their jobs by calling in sick – even if they feel miserable and are likely to infect their co-workers and customers.

Well paid professionals, office workers, and union members often do have paid leave benefits. In Washington, they can use that paid leave not only when they have the flu, but also if a child or close family member is ill or needs to go to the doctor, thanks to Washington's Family Care Act.¹⁶

The 43% of workers without paid sick days won't win them on their own. As voters, it's time to demand our elected representatives adopt Paid Sick Days laws to protect our health and our economy. **Because none of us wants to be served flu with our salad.**

“IF YOU'RE ILL WITH
FLU SYMPTOMS,
GO TO THE
DOCTOR, NOT TO
WORK.”

– SEATTLE TIMES EDITORIAL,
APRIL 28, 2009

Endnotes

- ¹ 57% of private sector and 87% of public sector get some paid sick leave. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in Private Industry in the United States, March 2007," <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebsmoo06.pdf>. "National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in State and Local Governments in the United States, September 2007," <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebsmoo07.pdf>.
- ² Author's calculations based on BLS national data for private and public sector workers, applied to Washington's workforce.
- ³ Marilyn P. Watkins and Cara Saunto, "Washington's Working Women: Not Equal Yet," March 2009, Economic Opportunity Institute, www.eoionline.org.
- ⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation, "Women, Work, and Family Health: A Balancing Act," April 2003, <http://www.kff.org/womenshealth/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=14293>.
- ⁵ Employers were allowed to define "part-time" for themselves. Washington Employment Security Department, Employee Benefits Surveys, 2002-2008, www.workforceexplorer.com.
- ⁶ CNNMoney.com, "Paid Sick Days may be next big cause," November 17, 2006, http://money.cnn.com/2006/11/17/news/economy/prop_f/index.htm.
- ⁷ *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, "Paid Sick Days Referendum Wins Big," November 4, 2008, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/33874059.html>.
- ⁸ City and County of San Francisco, "San Francisco Paid Sick Days Ordinance, Frequently Asked Questions," updated 9/28/07, http://www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/olse/SickLeaveOrdinance/PSLO_FAQ_POSTED.pdf.
- ⁹ National Partnership for Women and Families, www.nationalpartnership.org.
- ¹⁰ Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy – and What Can Be Done About It*, Basic Books, 2000, pp. 54-55.
- ¹¹ *Widening Gap*, pp. 57-58.
- ¹² Christine Siegwarth Meyer, et al, "Work-Family Benefits: Which Ones Maximize Profits?" *Journal of Managerial Issues*, vol. XIII, No. 1, Spring 2001: 28-44; Thomas E. Casey and Karen Warlin, "Retention and Customer Satisfaction," *Compensation & Benefits Review*, May/June 2001, p. 27-30; Vicky Lovell, "No Time to Be Sick: Why Everyone Suffers When Workers Don't Have Paid Sick Leave," Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2004, www.iwpr.org.
- ¹³ Paul Hemp, "Presenteeism: At Work – But Out of It," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2004, <http://www.ihpm.org/pdf/HBR%20Presenteeism.pdf>; "Economists coin term, 'presenteeism,' for on-the-job health slowdowns," *Cornell Chronicle*, April 2004, <http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/04/4.22.04/presenteeism.html>.
- ¹⁴ Vicki Lovell and Kevin Miller, "Job Growth Strong with Paid Sick Days," October 2008, Institute for Women's Policy Research, http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/B264_JobGrowth.pdf.
- ¹⁵ Shelley Waters Boots, Karin Martinson, and Anna Danziger, "Employers' Perspectives on San Francisco's paid Sick Leave Policy," March 2009, The Urban Institute, www.urban.org.
- ¹⁶ Washington Department of Labor and Industries, Workplace Rights, <http://www.lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceRights/LeaveBenefits/FamilyCare/Covered/default.asp>.