

PAID SICK DAYS: VOICES FROM OHIO



A REPORT FROM
POLICY MATTERS OHIO

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POLICY MATTERS OHIO, the publisher of this study, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute dedicated to researching an economy that works for Ohio. Policy Matters seeks to broaden debate about economic policy by researching issues that matter to working people and their families. With better information, we can achieve more just and efficient economic policy. Areas of inquiry for Policy Matters include work, wages, education, housing, energy, tax and budget policy, and economic development.

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Introduction

Currently, more than 2.2 million Ohioans do not have access to paid sick days and 3.3 million cannot use sick days to care for a sick child or parent. The Ohio Healthy Families Act would require employers of 25 or more people in Ohio to allow full-time employees to earn up to seven paid sick days a year. Part-timers would also be protected on a pro-rated basis. These sick days could be used if the worker or an immediate family member needed to recuperate from injury or illness, obtain preventive care, or get medical treatment.

In December 2007, Ohioans for Healthy Families submitted a petition calling for the Healthy Families Act to be considered by the state legislature. The petition had over 270,000 signature, more than twice the number needed. But Ohio's General Assembly let the May 2008 deadline for legislative action pass. By not voting on the proposal, legislators effectively put the ball back in the court of advocates who now must collect about 120,000 new signatures if they want to put the proposal on the November ballot for consideration by voters.

Policy Matters has done in-depth quantitative research on paid sick days, which is summarized in the box on page iii and can be found in its entirety on our webpage at www.policymattersohio.org. This report augments the numerical data by presenting a series of interviews with employees, employers and supervisors. It is not a random sample and we don't claim that the stories are representative. Nor have we verified our interviewees' version of events. Instead we simply present a range of individuals' descriptions of their own experiences so that Ohio voters can have a clearer sense of what kind of issues might be at stake for some workers and employers.

We spoke to two employers—both provide some paid time off and both feel that their workplaces function better as a result. We also spoke to 18 employees, some of whom had also been managers. Some we spoke to have paid sick days and some don't. A few of these workers haven't really needed the time off. Some have a good policy that they appreciate while others say they suffered because they lacked paid sick days.

Most described what seem to be valiant efforts to handle both work and family obligations. One woman shared her story of how having paid sick days encouraged her to get preventive care, leading to the early diagnosis of her breast cancer—as a result, she was able to continue working throughout her treatments and she remains grateful that a smart leave policy enabled her to avert a far worse (and potentially deadly) health outcome. One worker admitted to having taken some undeserved days early in his work life but far more described diligent efforts to fulfill their job responsibilities.

One employer describes how his generous benefits help him retain a deeply committed workforce. A young father who had to take several unpaid weeks off following multiple fractures to his facial bones tells how the ordeal left his family unable to meet basic needs. A mother mentions giving birth on a Saturday and working the following Monday. Several people described the guilt they felt when they were unable to take paid time off to be with a dying parent or a spouse getting cancer treatment. Workers tell of having worked for years—even decades—without ever having a single paid sick day, while others describe how a

flexible policy enabled them to balance their jobs and their lives more successfully.

In our small sample, two people described the dangers of driving trucks and buses while sick; one as a student driving a bus for extra income, and the other as part of his current full-time job. Both said they'd driven large vehicles when sick and feverish, an action they considered risky, but necessary given their employers' policy.

Our interviews were consistent with what larger studies have found. People need sick days when they or their families are ill or injured, to take care of their own and their children's routine health needs, and to speed their recoveries. People of a wide variety of occupations, ages, and family situations go without paid sick days. Though many people discussed not having paid sick days early in their careers, we spoke to well-established workers who still did not have this basic benefit, including one with 17 years in one workplace. We interviewed parents with children spanning the age spectrum and even to one grandparent who does not have paid sick days.

Several of those we interviewed commented that a combined vacation and paid sick days policy discouraged taking time off for illness, because workers have a desire to save those days for vacation. People with sick days separate from vacation days tended to use their vacation time, but not use all of their available sick days. Those we interviewed respected the purpose of their sick time, and usually reported using only the amount they needed to get preventive care and take care of themselves and family members.

The people with whom we spoke were not all of one mind about paid sick days. The two employers interviewed both allow employees to take some paid time off when sick, but neither offer a policy that conforms exactly to the policy being proposed in Ohio. Some of the employees we interviewed voiced concerns about a paid sick day policy or believed that employers might have such concerns. But in the end, all of those with whom we spoke knew that they had needed or would sometimes need time off for illness and believed that such a standard would ensure better protection for workers.

We know from government data that 42 percent of American workers do not have paid sick days while 58 percent do. Some of those who do have paid sick days may not have as many as the Ohio proposal requires. The proposal in Ohio would allow Ohio workers to earn up to seven paid sick days a year. In our small sample, five out of 18 employees currently have paid sick days at work and ten have never had dedicated paid sick days, although some of those have had paid time off with sick and vacation days combined. Such a policy would comply with the Ohio proposal, as long as employees could call in sick without having gotten advance approval of the day off. Several of those we interviewed have worked with and without sick days, and offer their observations on which system worked better.

This collection of vignettes is meant to give a glimpse of how paid sick days affect some people in Ohio.

Basic Facts

An October 2007 report from Policy Matters Ohio, entitled *A Healthy Standard: Paid Sick Days in Ohio*, examined the Ohio proposal and made estimates based on the best data available of how many workers would be covered and of what policies already have been enacted among Ohio employers. The report found that some 42 percent of all Ohio workers don't have paid sick days while 58 percent do. Other findings include:

- Families with children substantially increased their hours of work over the past generation, making it more likely that a sick child does not have a parent who is at home. Yet access to paid sick days has not increased.
- Access to paid sick days varies by occupation, pay, and industry in Ohio. Coverage is low in some occupations that have extensive public contact, such as retail trade (less than half), arts, entertainment and recreation (just over one-third) and accommodation and food service (less than one quarter). These three sectors combined have more than 670,000 Ohio workers without sick days. This encourages working while sick, exposing customers and diners to illnesses.
- Rates of coverage are also low in some physically demanding jobs that might be particularly difficult or unsafe to perform when injured or ill. For example, just 25 percent of construction workers have paid sick days. Other sectors offer much better rates of coverage. In utilities, management, information, and finance and insurance, about three-quarters of workers can earn paid sick days.
- Coverage is lower in low-wage occupations. Thus those who can least afford an unpaid day are most likely to be put in the position of having to forego pay or work while sick. Only 21 percent of workers with wages in the bottom 25 percent of wage rates have paid sick days.
- Middle-class Ohio workers also need better sick day coverage. Nearly half of those earning between the 25th percentile and the middle don't have sick days, and nearly 40 percent of those earning between the middle and \$21.65 an hour (the 75th percentile) have no paid sick days.
- The Institute for Women's Policy Research concludes that providing paid sick days in Ohio would yield a net savings of more than \$1.00 per worker per week.
- Although being able to earn paid sick days is important to workers, many workers use very few sick days. Among workers who have paid sick days, zero is the most typical number of days taken off for illness in a year. Half of those with this benefit do not miss a single day of work in a year. Covered workers miss an average of less than six days for all purposes combined, including caring for children.

Despite the modest use of this basic standard, for 42 percent of Ohio employees, this provision is not in place. This means that more than 2.2 million Ohio workers are forced to work when ill or forego pay. For more statistical and comparative data on paid sick days and for sources for the data here, see *A Healthy Standard*, available on our webpage at www.policymattersohio.org.

Justin Hons

A 29-year-old Cleveland high school social studies teacher, Justin Hons earns 15 paid sick days annually. He sees how important sick days are to his work and classroom environment.

“First and foremost you have to be enthusiastic about what you’re teaching,” says Justin Hons. “You have to be convincing to students that what you’re talking about means something beyond just—‘you have to learn this because you’re a student and I have to teach this because I’m a teacher’—you have to make them feel as if you personally care about what you’re teaching and make them care about it as well.”

Justin thinks paid sick days are vital to keeping him a healthy, engaging teacher. If he’s sick he can take a day off to get better without worrying about job security. That allows him to come back to his classroom at full strength instead of spending four or five days being sick at work, teaching at half his normal capacity.

In his previous job as a bus driver, Justin’s employer sometimes asked workers who called in sick to come in and work until a replacement could be found. “It’s dangerous, to be honest, if you’re not feeling well and you’re driving a 12-ton vehicle with potentially over twenty people inside. It’s not really the best thing to be doing if you’re not able to fully concentrate on the task at hand.”

Driving that 12-ton bus when sick is an apt metaphor for working with high school students when not at 100 percent. “You’re dealing with over twenty teenagers all in the room together, somewhere they don’t always necessarily want to be, sometimes very frustrated, sometimes just going through teenage things. If you have someone who’s not able to engage them, boredom



sets in, sometimes frustration sets in, and who knows where that could lead?”

Justin sees paid sick days as an important part of the larger educational system. He says it is a failure of the system if teachers who aren’t well are encouraged to come in when they can not actively engage their students and encourage learning. He believes the support of teachers helps the larger system function well.

His district also supports workers by allowing them to share sick days. If someone with no paid sick days remaining is ill, other workers can donate their time. “Paid sick days are an essential component to us having a positive, healthy working environment, which translates into the students’ learning environment. You take away those and you’re chipping at the whole ability of the education system to do its job.”

Linda Stamm

A retired volunteer administrator, Linda Stamm, age 64, describes her experience with breast cancer, and how a paid sick day policy of 12 days, earned annually, helped her seek preventive care and treatment.

Linda Stamm has had a varied and intense career: in the steel business, as the executive director of a nonprofit, and administering volunteer programs at local hospitals. Currently she's working to get birth certificates and photo identification for homeless and low-income individuals. Linda hates drawing attention to herself, which makes it surprising that she is willing to share her very personal experience with breast cancer. But telling her story is really just another way for her to be an advocate for others.

During her time as a volunteer administrator, there were very few times when Linda felt she needed to use her sick days. She was the only volunteer administrator at her job. If she was out sick, she would have twice as much work the next day. Fortunately, Linda did take paid time to have a mammogram annually. One year, doctors found something that made them worry. She ended up needing diagnostic tests, then surgery, then radiation therapy five times a week for a month. Linda used a total of three of her twelve paid sick days for all her treatment. She didn't even take time off to do radiation, scheduling her treatments during lunch instead. Since then, Linda has been cancer free.

"It was very tiny, it was caught very early, because I had the mammogram... if I had waited and had the surgery later, then it would have been much more complicated, so I was very lucky, very, very lucky." When first told about the lump, doctors said it was most likely benign. Linda was stubborn at first, resisting going to surgery over a lump that

was probably nothing. Her paid sick days helped encourage her to go ahead with the surgery "because I didn't have to worry about taking time off, it was just a straight line to the surgery... so it was very helpful."

“ It’s really a little grotesque to think that people could be quite sick and not allowed to take paid time off... Even machines get maintenance... To not allow that to happen for people is really mind-boggling. ”

Linda encourages everyone to get preventive health care after all it's done for her. She believes employers should support preventive care by allowing workers to earn paid sick days. "It's really a little grotesque to think that people could be quite sick and not allowed to take paid time off. For companies that do that to people, you have to wonder whether they see people as human or not, or whether they just see them as machines. Even machines get maintenance; they spend money on maintaining their equipment. To not allow that to happen for people is really mind-boggling."

Ruby Nelson

Ruby Nelson, a retired VA hospital worker, who now serves as a Warrensville Heights councilwoman, describes her experiences with paid sick days as a supervisor of other workers.

During her 27 years at the Cleveland Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Ruby Nelson worked her way up from telephone operator to patient advocate/hospital ombudsman, investigating and addressing patients' claims. But it was her seven years as VA supervisor of office operations and six years as assistant chief of office operations that gave her insight into management. The VA had a "good system" for sick days: full-time employees were given paid sick time, could take off two days without a doctor's note, and could borrow sick time in the event of an extended illness. Employees could also donate sick time to co-workers in need.

Although she rarely used her paid sick time—"Thankfully, I was pretty healthy, and because I really enjoyed my job, I was not off a lot"—she says having sick days provided an important protection for employees.

"I think it's a wonderful system to work in because you're protected in the event that you do have some sort of illness," she says, adding: "You shouldn't come to work ill, your production is not good, you can make other people ill. I think it's good to know from the beginning [that you can take off.]"

As a supervisor she says she sometimes saw people using sick time when it might not have been essential. She said she never challenged their excuses because "they punished themselves if they used up their sick [time]."

Ruby takes these experiences into consideration when looking at a possible state requirement for paid sick days. "You've got to look at all sides of the picture...and then somewhere in the middle come up with something." She says granting paid sick time is "the humane thing to do" and she



figures most employers will empathize with their employees' needs, "No matter who the employer is, most of them have families...and [someone in] their family is an employee somewhere."

But she is concerned about small businesses and staffing issues. "Take into consideration the fairness; how many employees are on the job, so that if a person is taking sick leave the job can go on," she says. As a supervisor, she sometimes couldn't find a substitute for someone on sick leave. "If all else fails, guess who [fills in]?"

Now retired from the VA, Ruby is serving her second four-year term on the Warrensville Heights City council, and is involved in countless community groups from the Board of Education's Board of Finance, to Friends of the Library to a church group called "Seasoned Saints."

And she is still appreciative of the working environments she has enjoyed. "I know that I am very fortunate to have worked for the federal government and now with the city of Warrensville Heights, and we have those policies in place," she says.

Charmin Léon

Charmin Léon is a justice systems advocate for Cuyahoga County Courts and a 37-year-old mother of three. She earns 15 paid sick days annually and describes how sick days have helped her have the flexibility to be a mother, a career-woman, and go back to school to obtain her master's degree.

Charmin Léon understands why some people oppose legislation that might create more rules, regulations, and paperwork. “I think we legislate ourselves to death, but some people won’t do the right things... Until we change our societal mindset that we don’t just take care of our own kids and our own households, and instead have a sense of being responsible for the greater good, [sick days] probably should be legislated,” she says.

Like most other working mothers, Charmin runs into a big problem when her children are sick. Daycare centers can not take care of sick children, and all of Charmin’s family members live out of state. “My kids, when they’re sick, they can’t go to school... if you take them to daycare with a cold... one, you don’t want to make everyone else sick, but if they have an ear infection or something, they can’t come back for a day. They’ll tell you at the daycare they have to stay home 48 hours, so what are you supposed to do? And they tell you that day, so it’s not something you can plan.”

Without paid sick days, she imagines it would have been very difficult to raise children, work and get an education. “My husband’s trying to go to school... You try to juggle all the balls to get ahead in the way that people tell you you’re supposed to get ahead. If I didn’t have paid sick

days, we wouldn’t have been able to maintain our household.” Though she is divorced now, having paid time off helped her and her husband as they both attended school while simultaneously balancing a marriage, children and jobs. Charmin recently successfully completed her master’s program, something she believes she could not have done without paid sick days.

The sick day policy at her job affects more than just Charmin and her family. Having sick days also helps her do her best for her clients, since physical

“ If I didn’t have paid sick days, we wouldn’t have been able to maintain our household. ”

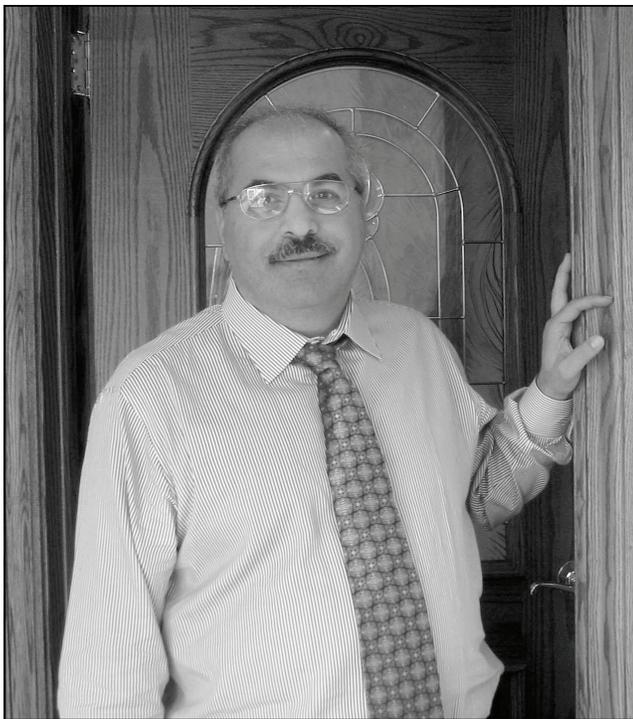
and mental health is an important part of her job. “I work with people in crisis, victims and witnesses of crimes, so my capacity to be

compassionate has to be at a really high level, and if I’ve got something going on in my own life, which we all do, and I’m not able to compartmentalize that... I can’t be so stressed out that I can’t effectively help them.” To help people who are in need, Charmin herself needs to be as healthy as possible.

Status in the States

Ohio is not alone in seeking reform in this area. So far in 2008, paid sick days legislation has been introduced in 12 states: Alaska, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, West Virginia; and two municipalities: Milwaukee and Philadelphia. In addition, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco now have laws requiring medium and large employers to provide paid sick days.

Fahim Gemayel



Fahim Gemayel, 49, the president of Painesville-based Lakeland Management Systems, a small company that designs and constructs buildings, provides insight into how offering his employees five paid sick days annually has helped his business.

Fahim Gemayel says his education, pure luck and a network of support enabled him to start Lakeland Management Systems. Since he started LMS in 1986, Fahim has seen how its success relies on the success of his employees: “You’ve got to rely on people, and people make your company. And we’re fortunate that most of my staff... most of them have been with me for the past 16, 17, 18 years... They have a saying around here, whoever gets into Lakeland retires at Lakeland, and never gets fired or laid off. We make very sure that if we hire somebody that we’re going to keep them.”

Fahim believes employees want a job that will provide them with good benefits like health care, vacation days, sick days, and retirement options. Part of the reason his employees have stayed so long is that he knew the business needed to attract good employees from the start. Even back in 1986, he provided sick days for his employees.

He made the decision to provide these benefits based on his ethics about how an employer should treat employees: “If you treat them right they’ll pay it back to you in so many ways.”

It’s not worth shorting employees, Fahim asserts. When they give so much of their lives “to work with you, work for you, and to be part of your success, if you cannot really reward them with a sick day or two sick days or three sick days, then you’re a user and not an appreciator. And employees are not dumb, they’ll give it back to you, if you show them respect or appreciation, they’ll stay a half hour late, or they’ll go the extra mile, they’ll meet the deadline. In the long run it pays off.”

This approach has paid off for LMS. When it began, the company grossed about \$300,000 a year. It now records \$15 million in sales annually.

While some may see a sick-day policy as just being about helping workers, Fahim also knows it’s good for business: “If you don’t treat your employees right and you don’t take care of them in a time of need, they’re not going to go the extra mile for you. They’ll become a robot and a punching-clock employee that is really there to collect a paycheck... You’ve got to have a good working-ethic relationship for both.”

Gilbert Whitset

*Gilbert Whitset, a 27-year-old
Cleveland working as a security
guard describes his changing attitudes
about work responsibility, and how not
having paid sick days has affected his
ability to take care of his family.*

Gilbert Whitset works as a security guard in Cleveland. When he's sick, he has to choose between his health and his income, but he's working to change that. "I'm trying to go back to school. I want to take this training class that Tri-C [Cuyahoga Community College] offers, so I can be certified to carry different types of firearms and work at federal jobs. And I'm trying to go back to school to get my associate's [degree] so I can work probation work and in corrections," Gilbert says.

Gilbert believes those types of jobs are more likely to offer the benefits he's looking for. He said paid sick days would be helpful not only for him, but also to encourage sick employees to take time off to recover.

“ I don't like to take off, so
if I'm taking off it's
something important. ”

"If you're sick and you can't do your job, then stay home," he said. "A lot of times, whatever it is, even a simple cold, can turn around and trigger off, and I can get sick. Then I have to take time off."

But he said he doesn't always take his own advice. "I try to budget myself with how much I make on a monthly basis. If [I get sick] around the time I need to pay my rent and I know the phone bill is due, I will push myself to get up and go to work."

Although Gilbert Whitset says employers should offer paid sick days, early in his worklife he admits to having called in sick when he wasn't. "When I was young and foolish, I did it: nice day outside; party yesterday... Certain situations like that," Gilbert says.

Now, he has a different outlook. "I don't like to take off, so if I'm taking off it's something important."

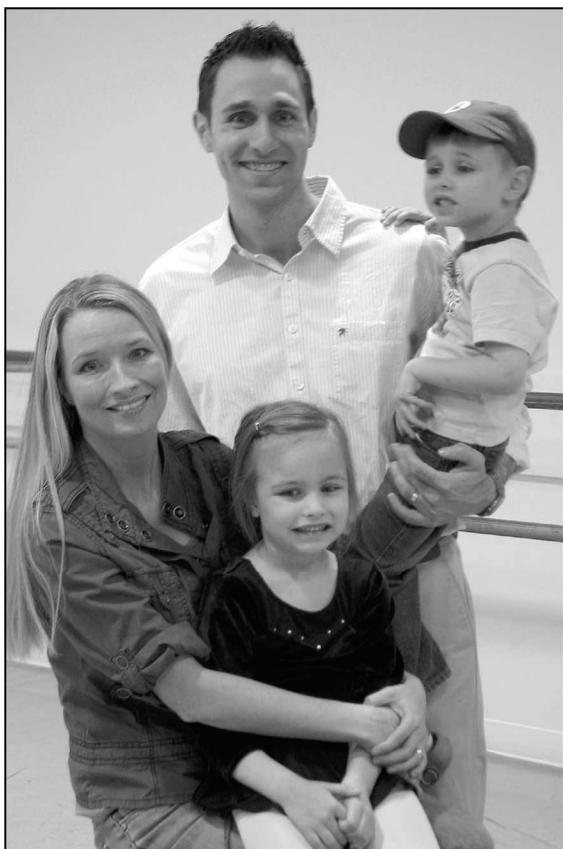
Sometimes, however, even getting to work is not enough; Gilbert said he has been asked to go home when "it actually showed" that he wasn't feeling well. "But if I'm not getting paid to go home... I really don't want to leave."

Sick time or family leave also would have been helpful when Gilbert's mother had a heart procedure. Because he was the only person in his family who could take care of her, he requested time off in advance from his previous job at a customer service agency.

"The surgery was okay, but she was in a lot of pain, and she couldn't drive because of the medication. She couldn't be left alone for 48 hours," he said. But his request was denied. "A couple of other people had requested the day off... people who worked there the longest get it first," he said. "She was okay, but it was just the principle behind it."

Mari Beth Smith

Mari Beth Smith, 33, is a part-time dance teacher and a mother of two young children who does not have paid sick days. She describes a time when she had to choose between earning income and her own health.



About five years ago, before her children were born, Mari Beth Smith (who goes by her middle name) worked at a department store while teaching at a couple of dance studios. During this time, her mother passed away.

The department store gave her a few days off to grieve, without pay. “I really needed more time, and not just for myself but for my father too,” Beth says. “I just wanted to say ‘I’m not a robot, I’m a human being, and really if I could be here I would. If I could trade places and have a different situation, I would.’ But it was just one of those times when I had to make a choice. I chose my health and I chose being with my family and I thought that was the right one. And still, to this day, I don’t regret it.”

Although she didn’t know it then, at the time of her mother’s passing Beth was pregnant with her first child. She returned to work with terrible “morning” sickness; a condition that did not

discriminate based on the time of day. “I would go to work sick as a dog, and I occasionally would have to leave what I was doing and, you know, go for a while until I felt better.” Eventually Beth left her job at the department store because of complications with her pregnancy.

Beth’s husband was in school, earning his MD and his PhD; being a full-time student didn’t pay very well. Fortunately, Beth and her husband had a lot of support from family members, in the form of a place to live and babysitters to help with child care whenever it was needed. Her young family even had financial support to fall back on—an inheritance from a relative was available just when it was needed.

Beth recognizes that some young families in similar situations would not have had the same support. “We always had our parents there who helped us get things we needed. Whether it be clothes or shoes, whatever, that came in the form of little checks here and there for this or that, or for birthdays, or for Christmas... We were lucky. Unlike a lot of people, we had a lot of help.”

Alan Slusser

Alan Slusser has held a wide range of jobs, all but one without paid sick days. Right now, he spends most of his days working at home as a caregiver for his mother-in-law, who is in the final stages of Alzheimer's disease. Though he has no children, he thinks of his niece and nephews as his own and volunteers with school sports leagues, scouts, and a local summer camp.

Of the many employers he's had throughout his lifetime, he says only one, Wal-Mart, provided paid sick days. Tops, which he calls the best place he's ever worked, provided him with paid bereavement leave, along with sympathy cards and flowers when he lost his father. Though he's experienced different sick day policies, he has rarely called in more than once or twice a year.

Alan discusses a day when he went to work sick; "I'd work until I dropped," he says. "Until I keeled over... I only got sent home once for being that sick. The manager said go home, cause I told him I had chest pains, because heart disease runs in the family. I thought I was having a heart attack." Because of that family history, Alan was frightened and decided to go to the hospital. Fortunately, it was just an anxiety attack; after his visit to the hospital, he recovered quickly. At the time, Alan had paid sick days. Missing one day wasn't a big problem to begin with, and the problem was made less significant since Alan was being paid during his time in the hospital.

Alan can recall another time when he was really sick and needed to miss work. "When I was in Pennsylvania I was off a week with bronchial pneumonia. I just told the boss I couldn't come in, he knew something was wrong. I left that Friday

Alan Slusser, 48, worked in retail in Stow, Ohio. In his many years of work, he has only had one job where he could earn paid sick days. He describes a time when his paid sick days helped him take care of health issues, and another time when paid sick days could have helped him financially.

before, and I called him Monday he said 'You sound worse than you did Friday. Stay home the rest of the week. Have it checked out.' "

This time around, Alan didn't have paid sick days.

“ I think it should be required, it would be a benefit to the employees, give employees incentive to work harder and appreciate their employer.

Even in a dual-income household without children, Alan says missing one week had an impact. "It hurt, income-wise, but we made it through with a lot of prayer, some savings, but not much. Some family money from my in-laws, my ex-in-laws, helped out. My ex-wife kept the normal work schedule."

” Though he has not usually had a serious need for them, Alan supports paid sick days for Ohio's workers. "I think it should be required, it would be a benefit to the employees, give employees incentives to work harder and appreciate their employer."

Anne Gronowski

Anne Gronowski, 42, worked in industrial sales, where she has never had a paid sick day. She describes the difficulty of juggling family and work obligations as a mother of young children in a family of low-wage workers.

Anne Gronowski describes a work ethic that goes beyond expectations. When it comes to sick days, she believes that it is most important to be at work, no matter what. Anne says she even gave birth on a Saturday and returned to work on Monday, without skipping a day of work. Despite her commitment to being at work whenever possible, Anne says it is important to have paid sick days to keep up her health and the well-being of her family.

Seven years ago, Anne received one week of paid time off for the birth of a son despite the lack of a formal company policy. “When I had my last job, when I had my son, they gave me the days off anyway and paid me, but I didn’t feel comfortable with that because it wasn’t part of the deal. It was a small company, 20 or less employees, so I felt guilty for taking the days,” Anne says. Anne returned to work, only to become ill. As a result, she says she was fired from her job. “They said ‘we have to replace you’, that was it, because there were no sick days. I had a week off for my baby, and they need someone there to do the job... I just went along with it because I felt guilty because I didn’t know I was going to be sick.” Anne has been staying home to take care of her children since she lost that job.



When Anne was working, her children’s grandparents lived in Cleveland, and the children were able to stay at their grandparent’s house when they got sick. Now, with grandparents no longer available, it is more feasible for Anne to stay at home and take care of her children. The lack of income has taken its toll. “When I don’t work, that’s \$30,000 a year we’re not getting. In a house of six people that’s a lot of money. That’s what my husband made last year, just \$30,000. I

said to him, ‘this doesn’t work’. You have to have two incomes in this society unless you’re rich.” Anne is currently looking for a job. She hopes that she can work opposite hours from her husband, so there is always someone at home in case their children need them.

In her free time, she says she makes herself available to seniors in her neighborhood who need assistance. She helps people

get groceries, provides her number for neighbors to call in emergency situations, and has helped seniors get emergency medical assistance. Anne would like to work in a field that taps into her passion for helping senior citizens, but needs to find work at a company that is flexible enough to let her take care of her children when they’re sick. Right now, she’d work anywhere, just to help her family’s finances. “I’m passionate about anything I do, but it’s really hard for me to get passionate about working at McDonalds, when there are seniors out there that I know need help.”

Chris Aron

Chris Aron, a 41-year-old Cleveland factory employee with 17 years at her current job, has never had paid sick days. She describes her experiences with her employer's point system and how her mother helps her care for her children.

Every day after work, Chris Aron picks up her children at her mother's house where her five-year-old daughter goes after school and her two-year-old son spends his time while his parents are working. The house is also home to a rambunctious sixteen-year-old cat.

Chris' employer, a factory where she says she has worked for 17 years, provides her with three weeks of paid vacation, but does not provide any other paid time off, she says. All hourly employees at the factory are on the company's point system. If they miss scheduled work time, workers receive points based on the amount of time missed. The company can dismiss workers once they accumulate more than 20 points. Points remain on an employee's record permanently and can be reduced only by completing a "perfect month" of attendance. Clocking in even a minute late will ruin what would be an otherwise perfect month.

Chris tries to use her paid vacation time when her children are sick, or when her mother is too sick to watch the kids, but her employers like vacation to be planned in advance and do not always allow use of vacation days for such emergencies. Her annual review was completed recently. "The only negative thing in my review was to schedule my vacation better... I said 'Do you think I like taking vacation like this? I don't like it. It's just circumstances that came up and I would do it again tomorrow if I had to.' You gotta do what you gotta do," Chris says.

She does not mind working on the point system, but says that some of its aspects do not make sense. When she or her children are sick, and Chris' mother is unable to help, Chris can try to call and use a vacation day as a sick day, but it is not always accepted. "They really don't like you to call in your vacation days. Which doesn't make sense to me, because you've earned that time. If you don't give it to me, I'm going to miss anyhow. I'm not going to be there to do my job. And I still have that vacation time, so I'm going to miss again... It's not like I went out and I got drunk and I can't make it into work. I'm staying home because my *kid's sick*." If her employer won't let her use a

“ It's not like I went out and I got drunk and I can't make it into work. I'm staying home because my *kid's sick*...”

vacation day, Chris misses the day's pay and gets three points on her record.

Currently, missing a day of paid work every now and then is not going to affect Chris and her family financially in a big way. "One day is not going to make or break us. Now if I had to miss a whole week, then that would have an impact... As long as Gloria is around then I know I'm okay, that's my safety net over there, I know she can watch my kids if something gets that bad."

Jane Smith

A 49-year-old Cleveland speech and language pathologist, “Jane Smith,” earns 15 paid sick days annually. Her sick days helped her as a mother of young children and help her be at her most productive at work .*

“Jane Smith”* speaks with confidence and poise, assured that if she needs to stay home to take care of herself or her family, she can without fear of losing her job. When she was a young mother working part-time, Jane used to rely on her parents to care for her sick children if she was unable to stay home with them. Years later, as a speech and language pathologist for the Cleveland school district, she is part of a larger organization that supports workers’ needs to stay home when they, or their children, are ill.

School employees are covered by a union agreement that allows workers time off to take care of their families.

This was very useful when her three children, who are now 20, 17, and 14, were younger. Her youngest child has recently become old enough to stay home alone when sick, but “when they were younger, no matter how sick they were, if they were sick enough to stay home I’d stay home with them, because I don’t want to leave a child home alone.” She says this

straightforwardly, though it is not so matter-of-fact for all workers. Jane is also undaunted by the possibility of a build-up of work from a sick day. She’s comfortable staying home when she needs to recover from an illness, not just because of her sick day policy, but also because of her schedule. If she misses a day, she has other time during the week to make up therapy sessions she missed. This flexible schedule ensures that the school’s children receive the services they need, no matter what illnesses are going around. “I just think that it’s a basic human need. If you’re sick then you need to take care of yourself, or if your children are sick

then you need to take care of them. It’s just too punitive to lose a day’s pay,” she says.

If she does come into work sick, Jane believes that her days are less productive. Without paid sick days, she would probably go to work, even if she wasn’t able to function at a high capacity. Because she is working with children, it is important for Jane to be productive, and to be at her best while she is at work. “Working with kids takes some amount of energy and thinking and behavior management. When you’re on your game you can do all that, but if you’re not feeling so well, the kids may be okay, but they’re not getting the learning experience that they could.” Jane’s health at work affects much more than her job performance; her paid sick days have

helped her care for herself, her own children, and the children with whom she works.



*Name has been changed at the request of the respondent

Joe Johnson

“Joe Johnson,” a 56-year-old former construction worker who is now rehabbing his own home, has not had a paid sick days since 1977. He describes a time when his wife’s cancer left her unable to work, and paid sick days could have really helped his family financially.*

“Joe Johnson”* sits in the unfinished kitchen of his 109-year-old colonial that he’s four years into rehabbing. His fifth-grade son, who is home sick, is curled up on the living room couch watching TV. Joe’s lucky to have taken on a project that keeps him at home and available to take care of his kids when they’re sick.

For most of his adult life, Joe has done construction work. But he hasn’t had a paid sick day since 1977. Joe’s previous job was with a five-man construction crew, remodeling houses in wealthy Cleveland suburbs. With such a small crew and the uncertainty of construction work, Joe didn’t have paid sick days. So taking time off for a family member’s health or his own meant a smaller pay check.

“It’s pretty unhelpful not to have sick days. It’s tough to go to work when you’re not feeling well,” he says, adding that he has to be “pretty darn sick to stay home.” He noticed his co-workers often made the same decision with the same negative consequences.

“To have a person who really shouldn’t be at work

“ To have a person who really shouldn’t be at work come to work because they need the money, it jeopardizes the health of everybody else that they’re working with. ”

come to work because they need the money, it jeopardizes the health of everybody else that they’re working with,” he said. Plus, “if you’re feeling miserable, you tend to go slower.”

When his wife was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1999, missing work was not an option for Joe. Between the birth of their daughter in 1994 and

*Name has been changed at the request of the respondent

their son in 1997, his wife had used so much of her paid sick time that she did not have enough to use during chemotherapy.

“I think she quit working in June and was off pretty much until January the next year and finally went back,” he said. Of that time, only about six weeks were paid sick days.

“If I was [home] sick, you know, we had no income,” he said.

Now, Joe works at home, and his wife is cancer-free and has a new, more flexible job as a school nurse. So it’s easier to joke about sick time. “Every time a kid is sick, like today, somebody has to [stay home]. I always tell her ‘Oh you need to take off because you get paid for it,’” he laughs. In fact, since he’s rehabbing their home, he watches over the children if they’re sick.

Because of their experience without paid sick days, Joe and his wife know how important the issue is to many families.

“It always kills me to know these business leaders will take an issue like [paid sick days] and not look at the reasonableness of it or even the affordability of it” before they reject it adamantly, he says. “I’d rather be treated like an adult and have some flexibility.”

Emily Braman

The President of Charles P. Braman and Co., Emily Braman provides her employees with 12 days of paid time off annually, that accrue on a monthly basis. She describes why she thinks a paid sick day policy could help small businesses.

Charles P. Braman and Co. is truly a small business, made up of the owner and two employees. Located in Beachwood, the company does ‘unusual’ real estate appraisals; typically handling cases where the government is purchasing real estate. Emily’s father started the business in 1956, and it has seen a lot of growth and change.

One thing that hasn’t changed is the company’s paid time off policy. In addition to the standard holidays, employees accrue paid time off at one day per month, and there is no limit to the amount of time off an employee can carry over month to month or year to year. Originally, the company policy was created so that employees had more flexibility, and could use days however they needed to. Started in 1956, Emily keeps the policy because “Nobody has complained about it, because it seems to work. It seems to be enough days for people to have sick days and still have a week of vacation.”

In general, Emily doesn’t want her employees coming to work sick, because they won’t be as productive as usual, and because they run the risk of spreading the illness. She sees that when sick employees stay home, they get better faster and are happier. “If someone’s sick, it doesn’t matter if they’re not there. They can’t do the job. Even if they show up and can’t do it, it’s not productive.”



She has seen the results of an employee who does come to work sick. “I had an employee who didn’t use her sick days and it was a problem. She would not do things right, and then her work would be sloppy or inaccurate... It would take a lot of everyone else’s time to ‘critique’ why she even came in and what was wrong with her, but also it would take a lot of her time, and she would come in complaining to me that she didn’t feel well...”

To cope with the employee, and to regain some productivity in her workplace, Emily sometimes had to send the employee home. “I tried to be a little tougher and say, if you can’t work, just go home.” She didn’t like sending employees home, and it made her uncomfortable taking away some of the employees paid time off, which was meant to be flexible.

In discussing the opposition to legislated paid sick days, she hypothesizes that if workers were guaranteed paid sick days, they might abuse them by using them when they weren’t sick. “I can see that employers would be concerned about that. But I guess you could solve that by doing a doctor’s note.”

Emily’s company is too small right now to be affected by the proposed legislation, but she has thoughts about how it would affect a small business with at least 25 employees. “If small businesses had to offer paid sick days, that would make them more competitive not less... Small businesses might be less likely to offer sick days so that if they were forced to that would make them more similar to big companies... So I don’t see that as a problem... I think it’s probably a good law.”

Kendra Wilt

Kendra Wilt, a 34-year-old mother and call center employee in Columbus, describes her experiences working with a paid time off policy when her child was sick and her hopes for policy reform in Ohio.

“As life takes its course, sometimes we have to take time to get well or help a family member get well,” says Kendra Wilt, a call center employee and mother. “My personal experience has been somewhat frustrating, as a single mother during a time of my daughter’s week-long illness. I did not have other family close enough to assist me, and my daughter’s father was not willing to fully cooperate in sharing time off to care for her.” Without protection, an experience like this could easily lead Kendra or any other worker to a precarious financial position.

Kendra works for a call center that assists people with online banking. Her job provides her with 24 days of paid time off per year. At first, she thought the paid time off system seemed nice, but then she realized holidays were included in the 24 days, leaving her with 15 days off per year once the basic holidays of Thanksgiving and the day after, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day and Memorial Day were subtracted. If Kendra needs

“ I personally would like to initiate a way for our country to be more attentive to our families. ”

seven sick days in a year, that cuts her vacation down to just eight days.

Like many other workers with the paid time off system, Kendra can not take a day off unscheduled without significantly increasing the risk of losing her job. If she does, it’s referred to as a “call-off.” “If I have seven call-offs, I get a written warning... Then beyond that if you have another call off you can be discharged.” This means that if Kendra or her daughter is sick eight times in one year, Kendra could lose her job. “I really don’t

think it sounds good in a sense... I think a lot of people are the same like me. You don’t want to be sick in bed for more than one day. You do your best to try to feel better in that day, that you kind of need to rest, and try to take whatever you can take and feel better to get to work the next day.” She has had five call-offs this year, but her days will ‘reset’ soon and she’ll have another year where she’ll try to be sick less than eight days.

Kendra grew up in Ohio. A job with the U.S. Department of Defense took her to Panama, but she returned to Ohio after having her daughter, because of the more affordable housing and greater work opportunities. Moving back, she’s had a series of jobs that she feels haven’t fully allowed her to both provide for her family and enjoy her work. Despite that, Kendra has managed to purchase her own home, something she’s very proud of. In addition to her call-center job, Kendra works evenings teaching Spanish to young children through a local community center. She hopes to go back to school for a teaching license.

“I personally would like to initiate a way for our country to be more attentive to our families, to have adequate maternal leave and decent vacation times for everyone to get enough rest to be productive and healthy people. This is my wish for my home state—Ohio, the heart of it all! Let us lead the way for a better future for ourselves and the rest of the country.”

Monica and Jason Bricker-Thompson

Monica and Jason Bricker-Thompson, ages 28 and 29, are a married couple living in Hiram. Jason is a chaplain at Hiram college, and has an unlimited number of paid sick days. Monica, a graduate student, had paid time off in a former job. The couple describes a deceptive former employer.

Monica and Jason Bricker-Thompson live in the small, quiet college town of Hiram, Ohio. Jason's schedule is flexible, so flexible his employer does not keep track of days that he takes off due to illness, though he often works more than 40 hours a week. The couple discuss what they will do when they have children, if one of the children is sick and needs to stay home from school or daycare.

"I think, ideally, one of us would be able to work either part-time or non-traditional hours so that they're either home with the kids when they get home from school, and the other would work full-time," Monica says. "I think it depends on what job I end up getting, but I would imagine that Jason's job would be flexible enough that he could stay home, or work from home or bring the kids to class. His mom is a stay-at-home mom, and she's only 45 minutes away, I think that when we get kids we could rely on her."

"Or I'd just probably stay home," Jason interjects. "Use a sick day or personal time."

Monica makes a sour face. "I guess Monica wouldn't, based on the gesture she's making, but I would be happy to stay home for our sick child,"

Jason shows up his wife with his superb paternal instincts, and they both laugh.

"I don't know how I'll be when I graduate," says Monica "but when I worked as a preschool teacher, I didn't like calling off. Even if I'm really sick. And it wasn't because I wouldn't get paid, I think it was more because you're doing something you really loved and you want to go in and do it. You know if you're not there, the kids either don't get the services they should be getting or the other teachers get overworked," Monica explains.

Monica's former supervisor did not handle absences well. Instead of stepping in and working with the teachers when one was absent, her supervisor either manipulated employees so that they felt like they couldn't be absent, or put the burden on the teachers, increasing class size. As a result, Monica only missed one day of work in two years, even though she was sick more often.



"Which is kind of manipulative on the employer's end," Jason adds, "because they're not providing circumstances where you can take a day off, and you feel guilty about not going in. It's one thing if you love what you do, and hate to miss a work day... it's another thing if you're told you can't take days off because your students will suffer."

Despite some negative experiences, the couple understands the hardships of employers. "You're paying for someone to have the day off, which they need, but that company also has to pay for another worker to come in and work."

Matt and Misty Bray

A married couple, Matt and Misty Bray, 28 and 26 years old, have one daughter, age two. Matt Bray works full-time at a retail store and has 150 hours of paid time off (vacation and sick time, counted together) per year; Misty Bray is a full-time graduate student with no paid sick days. They describe how their access to paid time off affected their ability to take care of themselves at the time of their daughter's birth.

During Misty Bray's pregnancy and when she gave birth, Matt Bray says he was very grateful to have time that he could take off, paid, so he could go to Misty's prenatal care appointments and be there for the birth of his daughter. He used two weeks of his paid time off after the birth and remained home with his wife for another four weeks, unpaid.

At the same time, Matt says he received a lot of grief from co-workers. "To them it was no big deal that I was having a kid. But to me, that's a life changing thing... I don't want to be having to deal with work 40 hours a week, school 40 hours a week, and then coming home dealing with a new child that I'm not used to. And there was a lot of stigma around it... they were making fun of me constantly..."

Matt's time was much needed by his wife as a new mother. "I wasn't about to have a child by myself," Misty says. After the birth, Misty says she could not lift the baby or return to work because of medical problems, and she needed help at home.

The couple began saving money as soon as they discovered a child was on the way and took out extra student loans to cover their costs during Matt's leave. Matt used all of his paid time off and

even most of the unpaid time available to him through the federal Family and Medical Leave Act to stay home after the birth. After six weeks, he had to return to work. Fortunately, Misty and Matt had family in the area who helped them out during Misty's surgery and recovery.

Because this is the first time either of them has had time off with pay, they are appreciative, but Matt questions whether the combined paid sick days and vacation time policy helps workers. "The theory is that they give you more paid time off than other companies get in vacation time, so it's supposed to be equal to companies that get vacation time and sick time. But I don't know... what happens is people go into work sick because they don't want to use their time, because they have a vacation planned in the future... so unless they're on their death bed or vomiting, people are at work coughing and hacking, because they don't want to take their paid time off."

“ What happens [with combined paid time off and vacation days] is people go to work sick because they don't want to use their time, because they have a vacation planned in the future... ”

Matt only has "one day of paid time off left until the end of the month... and I'm sick, our daughter's sick, Matt's sick... we're waiting until we're so sick we can't do anything but take the time off," Misty says.

Steve Smith

“Steve Smith,” a 43-year-old father and restaurant worker who has never had paid sick days, describes how not having paid sick days affects him and the food service industry.*

“Steve Smith”* is a stay-at-home dad of three very active boys by day, and works at a restaurant at night. He’s been in the industry nearly 20 years and has worked as a server, manager, wine-tender, and even as a chef. Though he has a college degree and some graduate education, he continues working in the restaurant business because he earns decent money and the schedule means his kids don’t have to go to day care while his wife works during the day.

He can count on one hand the number of times he has missed work, Steve says, and he’s pretty sure he’s never called in sick. When working in a restaurant in New Orleans, Steve began to have some back problems because of heavy lifting required on the job. He says he worked through the pain, and would feel the results later when he came home. Recently, a hernia operation and recurring back problems have Steve going to work in pain again.

A number of factors compel Steve to go to work consistently regardless of his health. Even if he had paid sick days, he would earn more working than he would if he called in sick, because he makes most of his pay in tips. Calling in sick would put him on his employer’s bad side, and could lead to other negative effects like being scheduled for bad shifts, being given fewer tables, and even having his hours cut. “I’ve always gone to work sick and felt strongly about that. What’s the point of calling in sick, I’m not going to get paid. It’s not like I’m having a good time at work



anyway. That’s the mantra for restaurant workers. I’m miserable at work anyways, so why don’t I just go to work sick.”

Though Steve is not optimistic about getting paid sick days at his current position, he sees benefits to a good policy. “I can see it in my wife’s job; I think she respects her job, and she feels more respected by her employer. I think of her job as being a little more legitimate than my job because she has those things: sick days, vacation days. I don’t want to call them perks because I think they should be natural...”

Steve knows that profit margins at restaurants can be very low. Yet as someone who sees his future in the business, he’s not against paid sick days. “I think it can only be a good thing. At its worst, it’s not going to put anyone out of business, that in and of itself... I don’t think that can ever be a bad thing, to offer people personal days, sick days to take care of themselves and their families.”

*Name has been changed at the request of the respondent

Thomas Estes

Thomas Estes, a 28-year-old father of two and truck driver who was badly injured, describes his experiences without paid sick days and the financial difficulties that result.

Thomas Estes and his wife are raising two boys, ages nine and two, and Thomas is a proud father, coaching wrestling practices, T-ball and baseball, and telling the story of his younger boy's birth. "He was 23 inches long and almost ten pounds," Thomas says, laughing.

Unfortunately, the birth was difficult, and Thomas's wife suffered severe nerve damage. She had been a manager at a retail store before she had the baby, but has spent the time since the birth raising the boys and recuperating. She's now nearly ready to re-enter the workplace.

Thomas has been able to work without any problems, until very recently. After years of what he describes as consistent attendance, Thomas recently couldn't work for a week because of constant nosebleeds. He then missed three weeks without pay after an assault that left him with two fractures to bones around his eye. The missed work put the family in a rough spot financially. Thomas went to a local church for money, applied for food stamps, and is only slowly catching up on paying the bills. The family was hoping this would be the year to buy their own home, but it's not looking like a possibility.

Without paid sick days, it is difficult for Thomas to maintain the family's quality of life. "It hurts a little bit. You get sick and you get behind on bills, diapers, then your family doesn't get to eat. Then, as a man, supposed to be taking care of your family, it makes us feel really bad because then we're not supporting our family, taking care of our duties as a father, and as a spouse."

Thomas' mother is now undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Without any paid sick days, let alone days to care for sick family, Thomas can't afford to accompany his mother to her doctor's appointments. He worries that she's going to pass away, and even then, Thomas doesn't have paid bereavement leave.

"You have to go [to work] because you have kids and you've got to pay your bills. So I go to work no matter what." Even if it means driving a very large truck with a 101 degree fever, Thomas still has to go to work. With paid sick days, Thomas imagines he could rest at home and eat soup when he's sick. But as it is, he tries to work even when his wife, child, or mother is sick, and even when he is sick himself.

Polling Roundup

Nearly all of those we spoke to said they supported a sick day standard, although some had caveats or concerns. In supporting sick days, our interviewees reflect broader public opinion. Providing paid sick days is a popular policy, according to a variety of Ohio polls. A February 2008 *Columbus Dispatch* poll of 4,390 Ohioans found that 45 percent of Republicans and 76 percent of Democrats favored paid sick days. An October 2007 poll of 1,000 Ohio swing voters, conducted by Beneson Strategy Group for the Campaign for a Moderate Majority found 81 percent support and 15 percent opposition. A May 2007 Quinnipiac University poll of 939 likely Ohio voters found 66 percent total support for paid sick days, with 52 percent of Republicans, 77 percent of Democrats and 68 percent of Independents voicing support. Finally, an April 2007 report commissioned by paid sick day advocates and conducted by the Kitchens Group found 72 percent total support, with 63 percent of Republicans, 80 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of Independents saying they supported a paid sick day law.

Conclusion

Based on quantitative research done previously, Policy Matters recommends that Ohio pass a paid sick day standard, allowing workers to earn paid sick days. This policy will reduce the spread of disease, encourage preventive care and recovery, allow parents to be with sick children, and improve worker well-being. The cost is extremely modest and the savings exceed the costs. Most workers won't even take a sick day in a typical year, but having this basic standard will enable them to take this time when they need it.

Our interviews with employers, supervisors and employees confirm that Ohioans would benefit from a paid sick day policy. Many of those with whom we spoke recounted stories of difficult experiences made more difficult by their inability to earn paid sick days. Others described how a reasonable paid sick day policy enabled them to obtain preventive care, recover from an illness, or take better care of their families.

The proposed Healthy Families Act allows full-time workers in workplaces with 25 or more employees to earn seven paid sick days a year, and allows part-time workers to earn sick days on a pro-rated basis. The days can be used to obtain preventive care, recuperate from an illness or injury, or take care of a sick or injured immediate family member.

The current Ohio proposal will not solve all of the problems these interviews raise. Some of the small workplaces will not be covered. The restaurant worker will continue to face challenges, since much of his compensation comes in the form of tips. The spouse who got lymphoma would still not have enough days to face that health emergency with its long treatment. Concerns raised about combining sick and vacation days would not necessarily be solved, since plans that combine the two can still comply with the new requirements.

Nonetheless, the Ohio proposal, with its modest, common-sense provisions, would help many of those with whom we spoke better balance their work and health. Other Ohio employers and supervisors would benefit from the healthier, happier, more productive workplace that Emily Braman, Fahim Gemayel and Ruby Nelson noticed. More Ohio employees might voice the kind of commitment to their jobs that Justin Hons, Jason Bricker and others with strong policies described. Chris Aron, who has worked at a Cleveland factory for 17 years, would be allowed to take a paid day when she or her children are sick, and she wouldn't have the threat of being fired because she was ill. Several other parents that we interviewed would have the option of occasionally staying home with a sick child without sacrificing their paycheck. Many more Ohio employees would have the freedom to get preventive care that Linda Stamm had, so that they, too, could catch serious illnesses early. The two men who had driven trucks when sick would have been less likely to have taken those risks; the restaurant worker who had worked sick might not have done so, and the high number of our interviewees who coped with their spouse's or parents' life-threatening diseases would have had more support through these very challenging times.

While not a panacea, the proposed Healthy Families Act would address concerns raised in our interviews, save money on a net basis, encourage preventive care, reduce spread of diseases, and set a healthy standard for the state of Ohio. An economy as prosperous as ours, in which parents are expected to work, requires that we provide workers with the basic flexibility that allows them to manage their lives and their health.

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