

New Policy Matters brief finds that maternity leave confers benefits

Because of exemptions, about 2.2 million Ohio workers are not covered by the federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) according to a brief released today by Policy Matters Ohio. The FMLA guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid leave to steady employees at medium and large workplaces, covering about 60 percent of workers and ensuring that 3.3 million Ohio employees can take unpaid family leave to care for a newborn or newly-adopted child.

Employers not covered by FMLA often offer maternity leave, but they lack clear guidelines about how to do so. The Ohio Civil Rights Commission is considering clarifying Ohio rules to ensure that all pregnant women are guaranteed at least 12 weeks of unpaid leave. Policy Matters conducted a review of research on maternity leave in order to help inform the Commission's decision on this issue.

“Guaranteeing at least 12 weeks of leave would provide a minimum acceptable time for women to give birth, recover, rest, get post-natal care, begin breastfeeding, bond with their babies, and provide for initial neo-natal follow-up care and immunizations,” said author Amanda Woodrum, who is a Policy Liaison at the non-partisan research institute. “Less time is insufficient to begin these important tasks.”

The study found that when employers do not provide sufficient maternity leave, women often either return to work before they and their children are ready or leave their jobs. In the first case, maternal and child health and well-being can suffer. In the second case, economic hardship can result, sometimes lasting years as career paths are interrupted. The brief also found:

- Most workplaces offer some maternity leave. Nationally 83 percent of workers are eligible for some paid or unpaid leave. Yet an estimated 445,000 Ohio working women are not eligible for leave for pregnancy and childbirth. This affects employed women in every sector and at different compensation levels.
- Providing unpaid leave is a modest burden for employers according to surveys and existing data. Of employers required to grant leave under FMLA, 71 percent do not find the use of leave for birth or adoption to be a challenge. Only 4.8 percent of employed women give birth in a given year and only 3.1 percent of employees (men and women) take leave to care for a new child
- Maternity leave is increasingly necessary. Three quarters of women over age 22 now work while pregnant and 60 percent of these women work into their last month of pregnancy. A large majority of women return to work within a year of giving birth, and most of those (79 percent) return to the same employer. In Ohio, 70 percent of mothers with children under the age of six are in the labor force.

“Adequate maternity leave encourages women’s employment, which has economic and labor market advantages,” said Woodrum. Among these are increased labor market productivity, labor market diversity, economic well-being, and job retention.

Adequate leave also confers health benefits. Longer leaves increase breastfeeding rates, bonding time, maternal attention, and immunization levels, all factors associated with better lifelong health outcomes.

Eighteen states and the District of Columbia now require private employers to provide some form of job-protected leave. A few states are going further and enacting paid leave laws. “The Civil Rights Commission should follow the lead of these states and the national government to provide a clear minimum standard of 12 unpaid weeks of maternity leave for all pregnant employees,” said Woodrum. “Forcing women to choose between motherhood and their livelihood is not a good for society, children, women, or employers.”