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# POLICY MATTERS OHIO

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View the report at: <http://www.policymattersohio.org/OutbreakInOhio2008.htm>

## **Norovirus Outbreak cost Kent Community up to \$305,000; New report chronicles cost of April outbreak stemming from Ohio restaurant**

The outbreak of norovirus that occurred in Kent, Ohio last April cost the community of Kent between \$130,000 and \$305,000 in lost wages, health care costs, tuition paid for classes not attended, and lost tax revenues. More than 500 people were infected with the virus, almost all of whom had eaten at a Kent Chipotle restaurant. A new report from Policy Matters Ohio estimates the financial impact on the Kent community of this outbreak.

Like most restaurants in Ohio, this restaurant does not provide workers with paid sick days. Some workers at the restaurant reported feeling symptoms of norovirus before the outbreak occurred, according to the Kent health department. Norovirus is a highly-contagious gastrointestinal virus that can cause stomach pain, nausea, diarrhea and vomiting.

Nationally, approximately 76 million cases of food-borne illness result in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths every year. About half of all food-borne illness outbreaks in six different states were attributed to norovirus in one study; and about two out of five of these norovirus cases are associated with the food service industry. Roughly 85 percent or 339,745 food service workers in Ohio – more people than in all of Cincinnati – do not have paid sick days.

This report estimates the costs the community incurred as a result of the outbreak. Among the findings:

- This outbreak of norovirus cost the Kent community between \$130,233 and \$305,337 in lost wages, tuition paid by students for classes not attended, taxpayer education subsidies, lost income tax revenues, and health care costs.
- Paid sick days, as prescribed by the Ohio Healthy Families Act, would cost this Chipotle location between \$12,601 and \$26,087 annually. The costs the community incurred as a result of the norovirus outbreak are at least five times the cost of providing paid sick days at this location.
- When the cost of paid sick days is estimated for all of Chipotle's restaurants nationwide (reported to be 704 in 2007), the cost of paid sick days represents only 1.7 percent of Chipotle's annual sales, and 6.3 percent of its labor costs, at most.

Paid sick days would minimize the degree to which workers contract and spread disease. Other policies, such as requiring gloves or tongs and requiring training in proper hand-washing techniques, are essential and already required. However, in the case of a food service worker with symptoms of the highly contagious norovirus, these other methods are insufficient.

Providing paid sick days would not prevent all virus outbreaks, according to the report. Workers might be contagious when they are not having symptoms, or workers who have already used their paid days might get sick again and come in. Nonetheless, encouraging food workers in particular to stay home when they are ill would reduce the likelihood that customers get sick when eating in a restaurant. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention lists paid sick days as a method of prevention of norovirus.

“Reducing the likelihood of spreading viruses is one among many good reasons to allow workers to earn paid sick days,” said Amy Hanauer, Policy Matters Executive Director. “If this restaurant had provided paid sick days, more than 500 people might have been spared a painful illness that resulted in unnecessary costs to the community, students, workers, and other employers.”