

POLICY BRIEF

Earned Sick Leave



Everyone deserves the opportunity to live a healthy, full life — but not everyone in our country has an equal opportunity to achieve this. CityHealth, an initiative of the de Beaumont Foundation and Kaiser Permanente, promotes a package of tried and tested policies that ensure all people in our largest cities have access to healthy choices.

Together, with visionary city leaders, we can make sure that all people have access to a safe place to live, a healthy body and mind, and a thriving environment. Policy solutions like Earned Sick Leave can help make communities healthier and resolve critical health disparities — now and decades down the road.

When we're sick or injured, we need paid time off from work to rest and heal. Cities that require companies to offer Earned Sick Leave ensure that all employees feel secure in their jobs when they fall ill — and keep communities healthy by stopping the spread of contagious illness. Providing Earned Sick Leave can also save employers as much as \$1 billion per year as employees can take the time they need to recover from flu-like illnesses — and stop the spread to other employees.

THE EARNED SICK LEAVE CHALLENGE

- One in three people who work in the private sector — and one in four people who earn the lowest wages — do not have access to earned sick leave.
- The economy suffers when workers report to work sick. In addition to the risk of transmitting illness, the decrease in productivity from workers who are feeling ill is estimated to cost the national economy \$160 billion annually.
- Most people who lack access to earned sick leave are low-income or people of color, including 70% of workers with the lowest wages. Retail and service workers are among the least likely to have access to paid sick leave through their employers, and low-wage workers, people of color, and women are overrepresented in these industries.

A HEALTHY SOLUTION: EARNED SICK LEAVE

- **Stops the Spread of Contagions** — People without Earned Sick Leave are 1.5 times more likely to go to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection than workers who have Earned Sick Leave. This risks infecting more employees and affecting the productivity of everyone in the workplace.
- **Reduces Employer Costs** — When people work when they're sick, it actually costs employers more than if they offered Earned Sick Leave. In cities with Earned Sick Leave laws, business owners report little to no financial costs.
- **Protects Low-Income Workers** — People who work low-income jobs and have Earned Sick Leave have the protections they need to seek medical care, get rest, and heal.
- **Improves Community Health** — Providing workers with time off to seek early or preventive care helps keep all city residents healthier and saves money in long-term health care costs.






AN INITIATIVE OF

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Going For Gold

CityHealth annually rates Earned Sick Leave policies in cities with criteria that set the “gold standard” in each policy area. These criteria were developed with input from national experts, are backed by evidence, and work to reduce or remove systemic barriers to health equity. Medals are awarded to cities that meet the elements necessary for the best quality policy (gold), a good quality policy (silver), and a passable quality policy (bronze). Cities with no policy, or that don’t meet the minimum threshold for a bronze medal, receive no medal.

EARNED SICK LEAVE MEDAL CRITERIA			
1. City has an earned sick leave law	✓	✓	✓
2. Employee can use earned sick leave to care for family members	✗	✓	✓
3. Employee can use earned sick leave for domestic violence recovery	✗	✓	✓
4. Minimum amount of earned sick leave time an employee can earn	✗	✓ ≥ 40 hours	✓ ≥ 48 hours
5. Smallest business size covered under earned sick leave law	✗	✗	✓ = 1 employee

SEATTLE LEADS IN EARNED SICK LEAVE

Seattle implemented an Earned Sick Leave ordinance in 2012, helping tens of thousands of workers access paid time off when they or a loved one was ill. Thanks to its effectiveness at providing economic security to workers and creating healthy workplaces, Seattle’s leadership and the success of its Earned Sick Leave law paved the way for the state of Washington to adopt a statewide policy in 2018. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Seattle again led the way by expanding its Earned Sick Leave requirement to include gig workers, such as those operating ridesharing services or making deliveries for app-based platforms.