

Earned Sick Leave

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 all employees feel secure in their jobs when they fall ill – and keep communities healthy by stopping the spread of contagious illnesses. 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 Challenge

- Workers without Earned Sick Leave are 1.5 times more likely to go into work with a contagious disease, three times more likely to forgo medical care for themselves, and 1.6 times more likely to forgo medical care for their families compared to those with earned sick days, according to a 2010 study of over 1,000 workers.^{1,2}
- A study of workers utilizing 2011 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that up to 3 million workers go to work sick every week, many of whom earn less than \$20 an hour.³
- The COVID-19 Trends and Impact Study of more than 20 million Americans in 2021 found that food service was the occupation with the highest share of workers that went to work with COVID-19 symptoms, endangering their health as well as the health of those they serve.⁴
- According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 70% of foodborne transmission of another highly contagious illness, norovirus, between 2009-2012 was due to infected food workers.⁵

A Healthy Solution: Earned Sick Leave

- **Allows people to seek early or preventative care** – Earned Sick Leave is associated with greater use of physician services including preventive treatments, showing its potential to reduce long-term health care costs and improve overall health outcomes⁶⁻¹⁰
- **Saves on long term health costs** – A study using nationally representative data found that providing earned sick days could save employers as much as \$1.88 billion per year in absenteeism costs from flu-like illnesses.⁹

- **Increases employment and income stability** – According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Earned Sick Leave protects people from losing income and employment, and ensures workers take the time to get medical care for themselves and their children when they are ill.¹¹
- **Is supported by the business community** – A year and a half after implementation of Connecticut's Earned Sick Leave law, three-quarters of surveyed employers expressed support for the policy, and most reported modest or no impact on their costs and business operations.¹²

What is the Evidence that Earned Sick Leave Policies Can Improve Health?

- A model examining the impact of access to paid sick days on the influenza attack rate in the workplace found that a large proportion of the attack rate was a result of employees engaging in presenteeism – a phenomenon where workers show up to work even when sick – and exposing other employees to the illness.¹³
- An empirical study utilizing data from the U.S. from 2010-2018 found that in states where sick pay mandates went into effect, rates of influenza-like illness decreased by 11% on average during the first year of implementation.¹⁴
- A systematic review (n=12) and meta-analysis (n=8) found that access to paid sick leave lowered odds of utilizing emergency care,¹⁵ and a longitudinal study from all-payer emergency department data from 2011-2019 found that state implementation of paid sick leave mandates was associated with a 5.6 percent reduction in the total emergency department visit rate, which was statistically significant.¹⁶
- The same systematic review and meta-analysis found that individuals with paid sick leave have increased odds of several preventative care activities including receiving an influenza vaccination, having a mammogram, seeing a doctor, and getting a pap test.¹⁵
- Modeling based on 19,634 private sector employees in 2008 and 2009 estimated that if all U.S. employees had access to earned sick days, 1.3 million emergency department visits could be prevented every year, saving the U.S. more than \$1 billion annually.¹⁷

How Can Earned Sick Leave Help Address Health Disparities?

Earned Sick Leave policies ensure that every worker has the opportunity to take sick days when necessary. Jobs without Earned Sick Leave are disproportionately low-wage, cleaning, or food service jobs that predominately employ people of color.^{3,18} These populations then suffer disproportionately from the health disparities that come from lacking access to preventive care, working in environments with high rates of disease spread, and without job security.¹⁵ While

enacting Earned Sick Leave policies benefits everyone, they are also a tool to help address existing health disparities.

- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2024 20% of people who work in the private sector—and 42% of those with the lowest wages—do not have Earned Sick Leave to care for their own health.¹⁹ These workers are also more likely to forgo medical care for their families as well.²
- Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous people are more likely to die from infectious diseases – like COVID-19 – than White Americans, caused in part by higher rates of exposure and infection linked to working conditions.⁶
- A study of more than 60,000 employees from 2017-2021 found that states and localities that implement paid sick leave mandates help close the access gap in access to sick leave that exists across racial and gender lines in jurisdictions without sick leave mandates.²⁰
- When Seattle required Earned Sick Leave for all workers in 2012, part-time and low-income workers, and particularly those in the hospitality industry, experienced the biggest increases in access to sick leave.²¹ Providing Earned Sick Leave for all workers can help combat the unequal distribution of health harms associated with not having access to earned sick leave.

What Are Some Future Issues to Consider?

Cities striving to boost residents' health and well-being are considering Earned Family Leave policies in addition to Earned Sick Leave. Earned Family Leave allows workers to take additional time off to care for a child or other immediate relatives. According to County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, Earned Family Leave is linked to reduced infant mortality, increased rates of breastfeeding, and improved child and family health.²² Today, many current Earned Sick Leave policies apply only to full-time workers. Coverage for part-time or temporary employees could be an area of future focus for cities as they continue to identify policies that support healthy communities.

Resources for Cities

National Partnership for Women and Families (NPWF): [Paid Sick Days Campaign](#)
Family Values at Work (FVW): [Resources](#)
A Better Balance: [Interactive Overview of Paid Sick in the U.S.](#)

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