



Vermont's workers need paid sick time

Editorial

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It seems like a relatively simple thing. If you get sick, you shouldn't have to choose between safeguarding your health or getting paid.

Yet 57 percent of Vermont businesses do not offer any paid sick time to their employees.

A group called the Vermont Paid Sick Days Coalition recently called attention to this as part of a campaign to get a new law enacted in the 2010 Legislative session that would give many more workers in the state paid sick days off.

No state in America yet has a such law, but 160 other countries around the world do. More than a dozen legislatures across the United States are now considering similar laws and three U.S. cities -- Milwaukee, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. -- have enacted local ordinances requiring paid sick time.

If H.382, "An act relating to absence from work for health care," became law in Vermont, employees would earn one hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours worked, up to a maximum of 56 hours each year.

Employees could use their paid sick time to recover from or receive treatment for illness or injury care for a family member; obtain diagnostic, routine, preventive or therapeutic health care, or take necessary steps for their safety as a result of sexual abuse, domestic violence or stalking.

At their discretion, employers would be able to "loan" an employee paid sick time if the employee gets sick before accruing time. Employees would not be able to "cash out" any unused hours if they left their job. And all employers in Vermont already offering equal or more generous paid sick time would be unaffected.

This is not just a personal health issue. It's a public health issue. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that people stay home from work, school or public places if they are suffering from an infectious ailment such as the flu.

According to the CDC, more than one-third of all flu cases are transmitted in schools and workplaces. Yet most workers are pressured into going to work sick -- and since working parents rarely can take time off from work to take care of ailing children, kids who are sick get sent to school.

Rep. Paul Poirier, I-Barre City, is the sponsor of H.382, but it got little attention in the 2009 legislative session. However, there is a strong coalition of advocates behind Poirier -- along with bill co-sponsors Rep. Michael Fisher, D-Lincoln, and Rep. Sarah Edwards, P-Brattleboro -- and he is more optimistic that it will pass next year.

"It's a basic human right to care for your children and to care for a sick person in your family," Poirier said last month.

The idea has strong support from Vermonters. The legislative and community advocacy organization Voices for Vermont's Children commissioned a scientific telephone survey by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont last summer, and found that 87 percent of residents approve or strongly approve of guaranteeing minimum paid sick days for workers.

Business groups such as the Vermont Chamber of Commerce oppose a mandated paid sick time policy. While the organization has said it supports the idea of paid sick time, it opposes any state law that would require businesses to do so.

We feel this stance is just another variation of the "leave us alone and we'll do the right thing on our own" philosophy. Self-regulation rarely works, and given the choice between doing the right thing and making a bigger profit, many business owners will choose profit.

In a time of economic instability, a paid sick time law is a low-cost reform that would promote public health and protect workers rights. It is a measure that deserves the full support of Vermont's lawmakers next year.