



Coalition to push for sick pay

By DANIEL BARLOW Vermont Press Bureau - Published: May 28, 2009

MONTPELIER – When the swine flu broke out in the United States last month, President Barack Obama and the U.S. Center for Disease Control warned people to stay home from work if they had flu symptoms.

Unfortunately, for workers at more than half the state's businesses, that would mean taking time off without pay.

"Hard working Vermonters shouldn't have to choose between being healthy and getting a paycheck," said Colin Robinson, the spokesperson for the Vermont Livable Wage Campaign.

Several Vermont organizations and a handful of lawmakers vowed Wednesday to push for a new law in the 2010 Legislative session that would give many more workers in the state paid sick days off.

Members of the Vermont Paid Sick Days Coalition said Wednesday that 57 percent of Vermont businesses do not offer any paid sick time to their employees – an environment that results in sick workers choosing between their health and a paycheck.

No state yet has a law requiring paid sick time for workers, but 160 other countries do, and more than a dozen legislatures across the country are now considering similar laws. Three United States cities do have local ordinances requiring paid sick time.

Beth Shulman, the co-chair of the Fairness Initiative on Low-wage Work and the author of the book, "The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans," said swine flu fears brought to the forefront the need for sick time reform.

Rep. Paul Poirier, I-Barre City, sponsored a bill that would have workers earn one hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours of work each week they perform – with a total annual cap of 56 hours of paid sick time, or about seven days.

But that bill got little attention in the 2009 legislative session, Poirier said. But with a strong coalition of advocates behind him – along with bill co-sponsors Rep. Michael Fisher, D-Lincoln, and Rep. Sarah Edwards, P-Brattleboro – he is more optimistic.

He said this issue is particularly important for low-income workers, especially single mothers, who might need to choose between caring for their sick children and their job. Sending sick kids to school only spreads the cold around to other children, he said.

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

Sheila Reed, the legislative and community advocacy coordinator for the organization Voices for

Vermont's Children, said residents of the Green Mountain State support paid sick days. A scientific telephone survey by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont taken last summer found that 87 percent of residents approve or strongly approve of guaranteeing minimum paid sick days for workers.

"A substantial majority of those identifying themselves as Republican, Democrat and independent approve or strongly approve of this legislation," Reed said.

Poirier's bill would also allow the paid sick days to be used for obtaining social or legal services for a worker or a member of their family in domestic violence situations.

Wendy Love, the executive director of the Vermont Commission on Women, said she recently heard from a woman who was fired from her job after she took a day off to go to court in a domestic violence case.

"Vermonters should not face the possibility of losing their job for seeking social or legal services they need," she said.

Michael Belyea, the legislative director for the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, said the organization strongly supports businesses that supply their employees with paid sick time – but don't believe it should be mandated by the government.

"Employees will end up paying for their paid sick time through lower wages and other benefit reductions," Belyea said. "If paid sick time is mandated, employers will factor that cost into the cost of hiring someone."