

Close to Home: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors should add paid sick days

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March 31, 2017

Last year, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved a \$15-an-hour living wage ordinance covering more than 1200 low-wage workers employed by the county, county contractors and firms receiving public subsidies. Affected employees include park aides, landscape, janitorial, recycling, security, mental health and other workers.

A broad coalition of labor, faith, environmental and community organizations proposed a living wage law in 2014 and is now requesting that the board amend and revise the legislation to make it more robust and comparable to ordinances implemented by Santa Clara, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Santa Cruz counties.

More than 140 cities and counties nationwide have approved living wage ordinances. These laws ensure that taxpayer dollars do not create poverty-wage jobs and that local government and private contract workers will not need to rely on public assistance such as food stamps and Medi-Cal to make ends meet.

When the board approved the county living wage law, supervisors set aside a number of proposed provisions for further investigation and study. Now the coalition proposes that supervisors include 12 earned paid sick days annually for all covered workers.

Most California counties with living wage ordinances mandate 9-12 paid sick day days, as do ordinances approved by the cities of Sebastopol, Sonoma and Petaluma.

Here's why paid sick leave is good public policy and how it will improve job quality for covered workers:

More than 40 million workers nationwide — who are overwhelmingly women, youth, immigrants, African-American and Latino — do not have access to paid sick leave.

Prior to state legislation passed in 2014 that mandates three paid sick days for all California workers, 6.5 million workers — 40 percent of the state's workforce — had no paid sick leave. The UC Berkeley Labor Center estimated that in 2014 more than 70 percent of California workers earning less than \$14 an hour had no paid sick leave.

Paid sick leave is essential for public health. According to the New York Times, cities and states providing paid sick days to their employees experience lower rates of seasonal flu than other comparable jurisdictions. Working parents who lack paid sick leave may send their sick children

to school because they can't afford to stay home, and their children are more likely to pass their illnesses to classmates and teachers.

Paid sick leave is good for business, too. According to the National Partnership for Women and Families, workers without sick leave are more likely to work when ill. They are less productive when they do so and more likely to expose co-workers to illnesses like colds and flu. Moreover, workers with paid sick leave experience lower turnover rates and save firms the costs of hiring and training.

Finally, paid sick leave is critical for the economic security of low-wage workers. According to the Economic Policy Institute, for a worker without sick leave to lose 3.5 days pay due to illness is equivalent, on average, to the monthly grocery bill for that worker and their family. One in five low-wage working women has lost a job due to taking time off for illness or caring for a sick child or parent.

Paid sick leave is affordable and does not impose a burden on local government or private business. A City University of New York study that surveyed covered employers after the implementation of Connecticut's paid sick leave policy found that the cost to employers was, on average, less than 0.4 percent of their annual sales revenue.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that employees abuse paid sick leave. A 2010 Institute for Women's Policy Research report about San Francisco's 2007 universal paid sick leave law (employees can accrue up to nine paid sick days per year) found that the typical worker takes only three per year and one-quarter used none whatsoever.

California's paid sick leave policy is a start but falls short of the safety net needed when prolonged illness or serious injury occurs within a family.

Paid sick leave is good public policy with positive outcomes for workers, employers and for the quality of public services.

The Board of Supervisors should say yes to 12 paid sick days.

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