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EDITORIAL

A benefit for employees, customers and companies

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In these days of heightened sensitivity about flu contagion, many of us are following the advice of experts to wash our hands frequently and keep our distance from friends and colleagues who are hacking and feverish.

With a long flu season still ahead of us, it may be the perfect time to consider a mandatory sick leave policy. Coming home from work or a place of business with a flu bug might make even a Chamber of Commerce lobbyist willing to support such a rule.

So it is not surprising that Congress and state legislatures are preparing to debate proposals requiring sick leave benefits for employees. The Obama administration recently weighed in on behalf of the Healthy Families Act, requiring that firms employing 15 or more provide at least seven sick days per year.

Early next year, the Maine Legislature is expected to consider emergency legislation requiring all employers to provide some paid sick leave.

The draft Maine bill distinguishes between large and small employers. Those working for a firm employing 25 or more would earn paid sick leave at the rate of one hour per 40 hours worked, or about six days annually for a full-time employee. Small firm employees would earn leave at the rate of one hour per 80 hours worked. The benefit would apply to part-time workers but not independent contractors.

The bill also proposes to allow employees to use sick days to recover from illness, obtain care for themselves or family members, or to care for their children if school is closed by a public health emergency. Time off can be also used to obtain services protecting the employee or a family member from domestic abuse, stalking or sexual assault.

The proposal has wide support from unions and organizations oriented toward health and families. The Maine Women's Lobby argues that paid sick days protect families and public health by enabling people to recover more quickly and by limiting the spread of illnesses to customers and co-workers.

Although the Maine House voted down a more ambitious proposal earlier this year, supporters hope to convince legislators that paid sick leave will not only reduce the spread of influenza, but also cut down on the spread of gastrointestinal bugs by restaurant and nursing home employees.

Of course many employers already provide paid sick leave or enlightened sick leave policies. These firms are already motivated to ensure that their employees are healthy and productive. Some argue that such government mandates jeopardize business profits at a time when the economy needs all the help it can get.

But the Maine legislation seems to appropriately directed toward ending the persistent problem of workers who feel they have no option but to work through their illnesses. This situation imposes a disproportionate burden on workers without benefits, and perpetuates a public health risk for all Mainers.

— *Questions? Comments? Contact Managing Editor Nick Cowenhoven at nickc@journaltribune.com or City Editor Kristen Schulze Muszynski at kristenm@journaltribune.com.*

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