



BUSINESS

TIME OFF, WITH PAY?

Massachusetts leads a push across the U.S. to give paid family leave to every worker

TIME OUT: Chrissy Considine gets paid leave from boss Grossman's Boston printing company to recover from a brain aneurysm

By KATHLEEN KINGSBURY

EVERY NEW PARENT KNOWS THAT HAVING a baby means weeks without sleep. Should it also mean weeks without a paycheck? That's the stark choice confronting Shannon Thomas, 21, a preschool teacher in southeastern Massachusetts. Her employer, the Boys and Girls Club of Taunton, agreed to hold her job for about six weeks after her June 18 due date but didn't offer any paid maternity leave. "My rent, food, the hospital—those costs aren't going away," Thomas says. So she quit her \$500-a-week job three weeks ago and applied for state welfare assistance. "I'd rather work," she says. "But I had to get whatever help I could."

As Thomas takes her improvised leave, lawmakers in her home state are hammering out what they hope will be a better alternative. The Massachusetts legislature plans to vote this week on a bill that would give all employees in the state 12 weeks of paid medical leave annually—100% of their pay up to \$750 a week and a guarantee to hold their jobs—to care for newborns or sick relatives. If passed, the bill would mandate the most generous paid-leave policy in the U.S.; it is the first of 24 similar proposals pending this year. Family friendly and popular with female voters, most of the bills are enjoying wide, bipartisan support, says Debra Ness, president of the National Partnership for Women & Families. "We're seeing real movement toward more paid leave."

The statewide measures, Ness says, close gaps left by the federal Family and Medical Leave Act, which was once hailed as a pioneering win for families. The 1993 law grants 12 weeks of unpaid leave, but because it applies only to businesses with more than 50 employees, just 62% of workers—and only 24% of those making less than \$30,000 a year—are eligible. (Many new paid-leave bills would apply to all businesses.) Among those who could legally go on leave under the federal policy, the vast majority, 78%, said they couldn't afford to take advantage of it, according to a 2000 survey by the Department of Labor.

The problems revealed by that study galvanized efforts to push for paid leave, but in every state, they have been met with insistent opposition from businesses. Nancy Comolly, owner of Laser-tone, a printing company in Littleton, Mass., with 30 employees, fears that guaranteed paid leave would encourage workers to take longer and more frequent time off, hurting productivity. "A trained, experienced worker will be missing for three months," Connolly says. "That's a real cost." And anything that increases the cost of doing business, says Jim Klocke of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, could send jobs elsewhere.

Such grim scenarios haven't played out in California, which passed a more limited paid-leave law in 2002. (Employees there can receive 55% of their pay for

six weeks.) According to a May report by UCLA and Rutgers University, workers in California took an average of 4.5 weeks of leave under the new law—half a day more than with unpaid leave.

Even if every worker took the maximum time off, employees, not employers, would bear the cost. The Massachusetts bill would fund those 12 weeks of leave with a mandatory payroll tax of about \$2 a week. Randy Albelda, an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, says companies in the state now spend \$370 million annually to support employee leaves by allowing workers to use vacation time or sick days to cover maternity or medical leave.

The new paid-leave bill would eliminate much of that expense and could actually reduce other costs. "This will increase retention, and training and turnover are often the highest costs a company has," Albelda says. Steve Grossman, one of the few business owners to testify in favor of the paid-leave bill, has offered paid leave to the staff of his commercial-printing company for 17 years. "They may leave briefly, but when they come back, they work harder, longer and better than before," Grossman says.

Having quit her job, Thomas won't be eligible for paid leave if the Massachusetts bill passes. Thomas is disappointed but says she hopes to take advantage of it with her second child: "For me, it would have made all the difference." ■

78%
of U.S. workers don't take time off from their jobs when they need it because they can't afford to take unpaid leave

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