

Busting the Myths about Paid Sick Days

FACT SHEET

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Nearly 40 million private-sector workers in the United States don't have a single paid sick day to recover from an illness or to care for a sick family member.¹ An additional 4.2 million don't have access to paid sick days to use when they get sick because they haven't been on the job long enough.² As a result, more than 44 million workers face an impossible choice when they fall ill: go to work sick, or send a sick child to school or daycare—or lose pay and risk getting fired. Working people need a basic labor standard of paid sick days. **Below are myths commonly used to attack paid sick days policies and the facts that bust them.**

Myth #1: A basic workplace standard of paid sick days isn't needed. Workers can rely on voluntary employer policies.

Reality: Reliance on voluntary benefits is not enough. Currently, no federal or state law guarantees paid sick days, and working families must rely on voluntary workplace policies. Consequently, nearly 40 percent of private-sector workers lack even a single paid sick day.³ And an additional 4.2 million are too new to their jobs to be eligible for paid sick days through their employers.⁴ Only 19 percent of workers in the lowest tenth of wage earners have paid sick days.⁵

Myth #2: A paid sick days standard is a “job killer” that would force employers to cut wages or workers.

Reality: A paid sick days standard will help businesses reduce turnover and improve worker productivity—and the case of San Francisco proves it. While a paid sick days law would impose modest costs, it is also likely to help businesses. When companies respond to the needs of working families, workers are more committed and productive, and workplaces stay healthy.

The success of San Francisco's paid sick days law proves that a paid sick days policy is not a “job killer.” Since 2007, job growth has been consistently higher in San Francisco than in neighboring counties that lack a paid sick days law. Total employment in San Francisco increased 3.5 percent between 2006 and 2010, while employment in five neighboring counties fell by 3.4 percent overall. San Francisco also experienced stronger employment growth than neighboring counties in leisure and hospitality, accommodation, and food service—the industries critics claimed would be most affected by a paid sick days law. And the overall number of businesses has grown more rapidly in San Francisco than in its five neighboring counties.⁶

Myth #3: A “one-size-fits-all” policy is bad for business. Setting a standard of paid sick days will make businesses less flexible.

Reality: A paid sick days standard will simply create a floor—a minimum labor standard that will level the playing field for businesses that already offer paid sick days. It’s clear that workers need paid sick days—and the public overwhelmingly supports access for all workers. A minimum labor standard of paid sick days would ensure that businesses are addressing workers’ basic needs. Employers are free to go beyond this floor to create policies that further meet the needs of their workforce.

Myth #4: Restaurants have small profit margins and large labor forces. They can’t afford to offer paid sick days.

Reality: While there are some minor costs to employers that provide paid sick days, the costs of not doing so are even greater. The largest study of the restaurant industry revealed that nearly two-thirds of cooks and servers report cooking or serving while sick.⁷ Without paid sick days, one worker who has to come to work sick could cause serious problems. For instance, a single foodborne outbreak has been estimated to cost a restaurant up to \$75,000 in direct costs, including clean-up, re-staffing, restocking, settlements, and regulatory sanctions. The cost of an outbreak rises dramatically if it involves death or serious illness. The indirect costs of a foodborne illness outbreak for a chain restaurant—including negative public opinion—can be up to \$7 million.⁸ And, of course, the costs to the public of such an outbreak—including lost work and medical and hospitalization bills—are tremendous.

Myth #5: Jobs will be outsourced if a paid sick days law is passed.

Reality: The majority of workers who would benefit most from paid sick days are in industries that are the *least likely* to be outsourced because they involve direct contact with customers. Service workers and care workers—people whose work depends on person-to-person contact—are among the least likely to have paid sick days. For example, three in four food service and hotel workers (73 percent) don’t have a single paid sick day to use when they are ill. Majorities of child care and personal care workers also lack paid sick days.⁹ These aren’t jobs that can move overseas—and these workers are integral to our economy and our communities.

Myth #6: Workers with access to paid sick days will abuse the policy.

Reality: The evidence shows that workers with paid sick days take only one additional day off per year on average than workers without paid sick days. Workers with access to paid sick days take an average of 3.9 days per year for their own illnesses and 1.3 days to care for their family members. Workers without access to paid sick days take on average 3.0 days off for sickness per year. *Among workers covered by a paid sick days policy already, half do not use any of their paid sick days.*¹⁰

Myth #7: Workers don't need paid sick days. They can just use paid vacation days or flex-time.

Reality: Most workers who lack paid sick days also lack paid vacation days.

Many workers who don't have paid sick days don't have any paid time off at all—no sick days, vacation, or personal days.¹¹ Two in five working parents with household incomes below twice the federal poverty level do not have paid time off of any kind.¹² In addition, many vacation policies require requesting time off in advance, but medical needs don't arise on a predictable schedule.

Similarly, flexible scheduling does not meet the same needs as paid sick days. Many workers who would benefit from a paid sick days standard work on strict schedules with set hours that may be determined solely by their employers with short notice. These workers are highly unlikely to be given the option of flexible working schedules. When workers' schedules are at the discretion of their employers, they are not guaranteed time off when they need it most—when they are sick or when they must care for an ill family member.

Paid sick days policies benefit workers, businesses, and communities. Working families need and deserve this basic workplace standard.

The federal Healthy Families Act would set a paid sick days standard at the national level. For businesses with 15 or more employees, the bill would enable workers to earn up to seven paid sick days per year to deal with personal and family illness. Under the bill, 90 percent of workers would have access to paid sick days.¹³

States are leading the way. About two dozen states and localities across the country have introduced paid sick days bills or have active campaigns. Support and momentum are building. Learn more at www.paid sick days.org.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010, March). *Employee Benefits in the United States: Selected paid leave benefits: Access, National Compensation Survey (Table 6)*. Retrieved 9 December 2010, from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>

² Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2010, December). *Fact Sheet: 44 Million U.S. Workers Lacked Paid Sick Days in 2010*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 7 January 2011, from <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/B293PSD.pdf>

³ See note 1.

⁴ See note 2.

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ Petro, J. (2010, October). *Paid Sick Leave Does Not Harm Business Growth or Job Growth*. Drum Major Institute for Public Policy Publication. Retrieved 13 December 2010, from http://www.drummajorinstitute.org/pdfs/Paid_Sick_Leave_Does_Not_Harm.pdf

⁷ Restaurant Opportunities Centers United. (2010, September 30). *Serving While Sick: High Risks and Low Benefits for the Nation's Restaurant Workforce, and Their Impact on the Consumer*. Restaurant Opportunities Centers United Publication. Retrieved 9 December 2010, from [http://www.rocunited.org/files/roc_servingwhilesick_v06%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.rocunited.org/files/roc_servingwhilesick_v06%20(1).pdf)

⁸ Marriott, N. (1999, December 1). *Principles of Food Sanitation*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, Inc.

⁹ Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress. (2010, March). *Expanding Access to Paid Sick Leave: The Impact of the Healthy Families Act on America's Workers*. Retrieved 2 December 2010, from http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=abf8aca7-6b94-4152-b720-2d8d04b81ed6

¹⁰ Hartmann, H., Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2007, February 13). Testimony given at Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Washington, DC.

¹¹ Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2004). *No Time to be Sick: Why Everyone Suffers When Workers Don't have Paid Sick Days*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 13 December 2010, from www.iwpr.org/pdf/B242.pdf

¹² Phillips, K. (2004, April 22). *Getting Time Off: Access to Leave among Working Parents*. Urban Institute Publication. Retrieved 13 December 2010, from <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310977>.

¹³ Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. (2010, March). *Expanding Access to Paid Sick Leave: The Impact of the Healthy Families Act on America's Workers*. Available at http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=abf8aca7-6b94-4152-b720-2d8d04b81ed6

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at www.nationalpartnership.org.