

NEWS

**Statement of Heidi Hartmann
President, Institute for Women's Policy Research
Introduction of the Healthy Families Act
June 15, 2004**

The need for the Healthy Families Act is great. New research by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) shows that more than half of all workers in the private sector and in state and local government are not provided with any paid sick leave after a full year of service. Another fifth of workers have less than the seven days that employers would be required to provide under the proposed Healthy Families Act. Of the 122 million workers in establishments sampled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and studied by IWPR (which excludes federal civilian and military workers, the self employed and those who work in agriculture and domestic service), fully 89 million (or 73 percent) have less than seven days of paid sick leave per year available to them.¹ A very large share of the work force, about 70 percent of the workforce or more than 85 million workers, also lacks any paid sick leave to take time off to care for sick family members, including young children.

Workers with no or inadequate sick leave are more likely to be in the private sector than the public sector, and workers at the low end of the pay scale have much less coverage than higher-paid workers. Less than one quarter of low wage workers have any

¹ IWPR analyzed the Employee Benefits Survey, an annual sample survey of establishments regarding a wide variety of benefits available to workers, for the years 1996, 1997, and 1998. The 1996 survey covered small private establishments, the 1997 survey covered medium and large private establishments, and the 1998 survey covered state and local government. The final merged sample contained data on 52,247 workers representative of the national wage and salary workforce outside agriculture, private households, and the federal government. Data on the number of days of paid sick leave available were analyzed by IWPR staff with the cooperation of the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

paid sick leave, and only about half of this number can use their paid sick leave for doctor visits or the care of sick children, meaning only about 10 percent of all low wage workers has sick leave they can use for sick children.

When employers do not provide a basic minimum standard of sick leave to their employees, they are imposing costs on all Americans. Who are the employers least likely to provide paid sick leave? Unfortunately many of those with workers we all come into contact with every day. The single worst record is that of the accommodations and food service industry, where 86 percent of the workers have no paid sick leave. In other services, a sector that includes child care centers and nursing homes, 69 percent of workers have no paid sick days. In art, entertainment, and recreation, 60 percent of workers have no paid sick leave. In retail establishments the percentage without paid sick days is 57 percent, in the bottom half of all industries. Workers without paid sick leave are more likely to go to work when sick, spreading infections wherever they go. Their employers are placing costs on their workers, their workers' families, and the consumers of their services. They are raising health care costs for all of us.

Providing sick leave to workers who don't have it will cost a substantial amount in additional pay to these workers, and the employers who are currently not providing it will bear the lion's share of these costs. A review of the consequences of the lack of sick leave coverage, provided in the new IWPR report, *No Time to be Sick: Why Everyone Suffers When Workers Don't Have Paid Sick Leave*, also points to the benefits that would accrue from the new coverage. Against the costs of the proposed legislation, we must set the benefits that would accrue from the new coverage:

- children will get well quicker, miss fewer days of school, and infect fewer other children;

- workers will recover more quickly, be more productive on the job, and infect fewer co-workers, clients, and customers;
- fewer health care resources will be used and the costs of health care will fall; and
- wage earners will be less likely to lose pay or their jobs when they must take time off for their own illness or the illness of a family member; families will suffer less financial loss and welfare and unemployment costs will be saved.

Cost savings to business, families, and to society through expanded sick leave are likely to be substantial. Having a minimum standard of leave that can be used for a worker's own illness or to enable her or him to care for ill family members should be viewed as an essential right of all Americans and as a basic matter of fairness.