

Valuing our Hard-Working Families

Written by Nikiya Harris Dodd, State Senator 6th District
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MADISON - As a mother, I can only imagine what parents must face when they have to choose between taking care of their sick baby or losing their job. I brought my baby into this world knowing that I would do anything to protect him and to ensure that he stays healthy and strong. Luckily for my husband and me, Wisconsin law includes strong protections for hard-working families like ours.

When Wisconsin's Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was signed into law 27 years ago, it granted critical protections to parents and caregivers and gave businesses the boost they needed to maintain a healthy, loyal and educated workforce. Wisconsin led the nation in its efforts to ensure that our state valued its hardworking families and its businesses.

Wisconsin law recognizes that our hard workers often have dueling responsibilities- between their employment, children, taking care of an elderly parent, or tending to a sick spouse. Wisconsin's FMLA law ensures job retention in the event of family emergencies so that businesses can maintain a quality work force.

Recently, Republican legislators have indicated their desire to repeal Wisconsin's FMLA law, a move that would undermine decades of employer-employee protections. Wisconsin values the unique relationship that every employer has with their employees and allows for employers to sign off on employee FMLA requests to maintain a level playing field.

In addition, Wisconsin's law provides better protections to families than the federal FMLA law. Unlike the federal law, Wisconsin law expands coverage to allow workers to get caregiving leave to care for a parent-in-law or domestic partner. Wisconsin also allows employees to elect for themselves whether to substitute accrued paid leave of any type for unpaid leave under FMLA. This includes compensatory, vacation, and sick leave.

Under the federal law, an employee can only use accrued sick leave for themselves or a family member's serious health condition and only to the extent allowed by their employer. A serious health condition does not include the birth or adoption of a child.

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Unfortunately, Wisconsin's FMLA law has been under attack since 2011, when Republicans pushed legislation to limit coverage under Wisconsin's law and allow the federal government to dictate our guidelines. At the time, the fiscal estimate submitted by the Department of Workforce Development estimated that this devastating move would cost the state nearly \$900,000 annually.

As Wisconsin continues to recover from its economic recession and Gov. Walker's \$2.2 billion budget deficit, the last thing our hardworking families need to face is an additional financial hardship. With Wisconsin being a leader in its innovative and business-friendly approach to FMLA, it is unclear why Republican lawmakers now want to dig a larger budget deficit while simultaneously weakening protections for families.

Wisconsin is lucky to have talented, experienced workers, who take pride in their work and value their family above all else. My Republican colleagues would be doing a disservice to these extraordinary workers if they choose to gut Wisconsin's FMLA law.