

Medical Leave: 'Treat family like family'

Written by Wisconsin Senate, Tony Palese
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Senate Democratic Leader urges passage of paid family leave bill.

MADISON, WI – Caring for a newborn or an ailing relative is a stressful time for many families, especially since these situations often force workers to take unpaid leave for weeks or months at a time. While Wisconsin was a trailblazing state in the 1980's when it became the first to pass a state Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), many are now looking to reform and improve the nearly 30-year-old statute. A new proposal unveiled by Wisconsin Democratic lawmakers dubbed the Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act would make numerous changes to ensure Wisconsin's family protections reflect modern workplace realities.



“One of the biggest frustrations I hear from workers is that we’re the only industrialized country in the world that doesn’t guarantee employees paid family leave,” said Senate Democratic Leader **Jennifer Shilling** (D-La Crosse). “With more dual income households, it can be difficult for a family to make ends meet if a parent can’t work and has to go unpaid for three months after giving birth or when caring for a close relative. It’s time we bring our state into the 21st century, reward hard work and recognize the importance of building strong, healthy families.”

The effort to reform and improve Wisconsin's outdated FMLA law has gained momentum in recent years as families and businesses increasingly recognize the importance of workplace flexibility. In a national poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in 2016, 72% of respondents surveyed said they supported paid family leave.

“Right now, we’re losing too many of our young, talented workers to neighboring states,” added Shilling. “If we want to make Wisconsin more competitive, we need to look at innovative ways to reward hard work, expand economic opportunities and help businesses retain talented employees. This bill eliminates administrative barriers for small businesses and ensures that we treat our workplace family like we’d treat our own family.”

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The federal FMLA allows for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for most workers to care for a newborn or a spouse, child or parent who has a serious health condition. The Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act would make Wisconsin workers eligible for up to 12 weeks of paid leave for personal or family illness, or to care for a new child. It would also expand the definition of eligible family members for whom an employee could take paid leave to include siblings, grandchildren and grandparents. Similar to insurance coverage, it would be supported through payroll contributions from workers and employers.

This proposal is part of a broad effort by Democrats to strengthen the middle class. Additional Democratic bills prioritize access to health care, student loan debt relief and child care affordability.