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Why Paid Sick Leave is an Effective Treatment Against Coronavirus COVID-19

In 2016 the City of Chicago passed an ordinance to provide workers with up to 40 hours of paid sick leave per year. Cook County quickly followed with a similar ordinance, but 112 of 133 suburban municipalities surrounding Chicago have since opted out of the ordinance, utilizing their home rule authority to claim that it was too costly for business owners. With the outbreak of COVID-19 (the Coronavirus) it is apparent why paid sick leave is vital for the health—and the economy-- of the nation. Yet, millions of workers are not entitled to paid sick leave. Just eleven states and Washington, DC have passed paid sick leave legislation.¹ Although 73% of workers in the private sector have access to some paid sick days², there are major gaps. Workers in low paid jobs are most likely to lack coverage^{3,4} and many of these jobs require contact with the public—for example, fast food and restaurant workers, retail workers, and airport workers who clean aircraft cabins and restrooms in the terminals. Home care workers attending to the elderly and people with disabilities are in the top three fastest growing occupations⁵, and they too, lack coverage.⁶

Another large and growing group of workers who lack paid sick leave benefits are those in the gig economy: "...because the (on-demand) companies largely treat their workers as independent contractors -- a status that is currently being challenged in the state of California -- they aren't currently entitled to benefits such as health insurance, paid time off or sick leave. Uber and Lyft sent messages to workers in recent days with guidance that handwashing and cleanliness are important and noted that drivers should disinfect their vehicles frequently. But the fact remains that these workers do not have paid sick days, meaning they potentially must weigh their livelihood against risking their health and that of their passengers."⁷

Recent reports in the broadcast media illustrate the dimensions of this problem and its implications for the nation's health and economy⁸ as well the print and online media: "The United States is one of the few wealthy democracies in the world that does not mandate paid sick leave...Employers, as well as policymakers who oppose paid leave policies, tend to focus on short-term profitability: If you pay a worker to stay home sick, it's easy to calculate exactly how much that costs your company. But they overlook the much larger and harder-to-calculate costs of not having a paid sick leave policy: More workers out sick because of those who are spreading the virus in the workplace, as well as decreased economic demand stemming from greater rates of illness among potential customers."⁹

What should employers do to minimize the risk of infectious disease among their employees?

Some employers are allowing employees with desk jobs to work remotely from home, but that is not an option for transport workers, retail workers, health care workers and many others who must be present for the enterprise to function.^{10,11} New York's governor has proposed that workers who are quarantined,

receive full pay from their employers and the right to return to their jobs.¹² In Illinois, the Pritzker administration has announced emergency rules to provide unemployment benefits to workers who have become sick from COVID-19.¹³ A bill has been introduced in Congress to require employers to provide seven paid days of sick leave to workers and 14 sick days available immediately in the event of public health emergencies such as COVID-19¹⁴ and on March 11, 2020 the House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee held a hearing on the Healthy Families Act (H.R.1784), which examined a paid sick leave plan for U.S. workers.¹⁵ The Trump administration is considering paid sick leave for hourly workers who lack coverage.¹⁶

The coronavirus has clearly begun to take a toll on the U.S. economy. Early on, workers' rights advocacy organizations raised the alarm and offered suggestions for improved workplace policies and practices in particular industries.^{17,18} As for preventive measures to significantly lower risk for workers at highest risk, OSHA could issue an emergency standard. In 2010, after the H1N1 epidemic, OSHA began working on a standard to prevent transmission of airborne diseases, such as flu and TB. The standard, completed in 2017, has not been released.^{19,20} On March 6, the AFL-CIO and 21 affiliate unions petitioned OSHA to issue an emergency standard.²¹ If employers demonstrated the business case for such a regulation and joined with worker advocacy organizations, the government would more acutely feel the urgency to act. In the meantime, in addition to paid sick leave for all workers and remote work for employees where it is practicable, here are steps that employers can take and resources for more information:

Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (NIOSH)
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-business-response.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fguidance-business-response.html

Getting Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19 (World Health Organization)
<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>

The COVID-19 Risk Communication Package for Health Care Facilities (World Health Organization)
<https://iris.wpro.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665.1/14482/COVID-19-022020.pdf>

These resources provide the most current information about COVID-19:

- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website –[COVID-19](#).
- Illinois-specific information can be found at the Illinois Department of Public Health's COVID-19 website. [Illinois Department of Public Health](#). Phone 1-800-889-3931 or Email: DPH.SICK@ILLINOIS.GOV for additional questions.
- Chicago-specific information can be found at the Chicago Department of Public Health's COVID-19 website. [Chicago Department of Public Health](#). Phone: 312-746-4835 or Email: coronavirus@chicago.gov for additional questions. This website will be updated with additional guidance as it becomes available.
- Cook County-specific information can be found at the Cook County Department of Public Health Novel Coronavirus Outbreak website. [Cook County Department of Public Health](#).

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