



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

February 13, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, Schumer, and McCarthy,

We applaud Congress for recently providing 12 weeks of paid parental leave to more than two million moms and dads who serve as federal employees. We've all become accustomed to lamenting the divided and paralyzed state of our politics. But on paid family leave—an important 'kitchen table' issue that could make an immediate difference to millions of Americans—bipartisan consensus is building.

Growing interest in paid leave reflects a broad recognition that, despite a strong economy and low unemployment, many American families today are struggling. That's partly because seismic social and economic shifts have made it increasingly difficult to juggle the demands of work and family life. The great majority of American households are headed by dual-working parents or a single-working parent. Most mothers (70 percent of women with children below the age of 18) are in the workforce, and one in four new mothers return to work less than two weeks after giving birth. At the same time, more Americans than ever—by some estimates as many as 40 million—are providing care to elderly relatives and other family members who are sick or need support.

When Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993, it was an early recognition that America's working families needed help. Today, more than a quarter of a century later, it is time to do more. For one thing, the Act simply doesn't cover enough workers: with so many people employed by small businesses, or self-employed, or in non-traditional work arrangements, as much as 40 percent of the U.S. workforce does not qualify for FMLA protections to deal with



for parental, family caregiving or medical needs. Even among those who do qualify, many simply cannot afford to take unpaid leave. In fact, only 19 percent of American workers now have defined *paid* family leave benefits through their employer. Among low-wage and hourly workers—precisely the workers who are least likely to be able to afford going without a paycheck for a period of time—the fraction with access to employer-provided paid leave is even smaller.

Given these realities, we need to strengthen our nation’s leave policies. Growing numbers of states are considering or adopting new policies and several large companies have begun offering expanded leave benefits for their employees. But the federal government also has a role to play in addressing some of the shortcomings in our current system and extending leave protections to ensure that more working families have a fighting chance to achieve financial security while also providing the care their loved ones need.

Any new national paid leave program should be designed with a couple of key facts in mind:

The U.S. economy has changed. Single-parent and dual-working households are on the rise and significantly more caregivers are in the workforce.

The private sector alone cannot address the needs of working families. While many employers are stepping up to provide paid leave, most of these leave programs benefit higher-wage workers.

Meaningful wage replacement. We have learned from state paid leave programs that wage replacement needs to be substantial enough to ensure all workers have enough resources to take time to focus on family, especially low-wage workers for whom the replacement should equal at least 75 percent of average weekly wages for workers 200 percent of the poverty line and below.

Expanding job protection beyond FMLA. As we’ve seen in states with paid family leave programs, workers who need paid family leave the most often do not take it for fear of losing their job.



Benefit men and women equally. We know that long-term outcomes for children improve with caregiving from both parents and want to promote paternal engagement and ensure women are not subjected to hiring and workplace bias.

Impacts on small business. Small businesses provide a path to economic mobility and security for millions of workers and contribute in important ways to community cohesion. Paid family leave programs can be designed so all small business employees benefit without overburdening the business financially or administratively, as we have seen in state policy design.

Maintain millennial workforce participation. As the largest working segment of America, today's young people are balancing new challenges—they are the largest segment of child-bearing age and include more dual-worker families. They also work in new sectors (non-traditional work and the gig economy) and are seeking more flexible work environments to manage home and work demands.

At a time when many Americans are losing faith in the ability of elected leaders to work together in ways that respond to their real needs, the symbolic and practical value of action on paid family leave is hard to overstate. The attached paper provides core information on the topic and we hope will serve as a useful tool. We look forward to working with policymakers and stakeholders alike and remain optimistic that we can reach agreement on a national paid family leave program.

Sincerely,

Chris Dodd
*Former U.S. Senator,
Connecticut*

Rick Santorum
*Former U.S. Senator,
Pennsylvania*

Maria Contreras-
Sweet
*Former Administrator, U.S.
Small Business
Administration*

CC: Senate Finance Committee Members; Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Members; House Ways and Means Committee Members; House Education and Labor Committee Members