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Let's Out

Since 2010, 15 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws requiring employers to allow workers to earn paid sick time.

Isaac M. O'Bannon • Dec. 21, 2023



Although a growing number of states have enacted paid sick leave laws, the share of

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new laws, with the Pacific and New England regions having the highest access rates at 94% and 87%, respectively.

Despite gains for low-wage workers, access to paid sick leave remains highly unequal. Among the 10% of private-sector workers with the highest wages, 96% have access to paid sick days—much higher than the 39% access rate for workers in the bottom 10% of the wage distribution. This is particularly troubling since low-wage workers are least able to absorb lost wages when they or their family members are sick.

For the average worker who lacks paid sick days, the costs of taking unpaid sick time can make a painful dent in their monthly budget. The report calculates that lost wages from taking five days of unpaid sick leave are equivalent to the average worker's entire monthly grocery budget. Three days of unpaid sick time translate into the average household's monthly utilities budget, potentially cutting off electricity or heat to the family's home. Two days of unpaid sick time are more than the equivalent of a month's worth of gas, making it difficult to get to work.

“Low-wage workers are the least likely to have paid sick days and the least likely to have room in their budget to take unpaid sick time. We shouldn't make workers choose between going to work sick or going without pay. Expanding access to paid sick days will mean stronger, healthier families and communities,” said Elise Gould, EPI senior economist and co-author of the report.

Far more full-time workers have access to paid sick time compared with part-time workers—87% versus 51%. Union workers are more likely to have access (86%) compared with nonunion workers (77%). And 89% of workers in large establishments (500 or more workers) have access as opposed to 71% of workers in small establishments (fewer than 50 workers).

Paid sick leave is a wise investment for businesses, workers, and communities.

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“State-level laws providing the right to paid sick days have had a significant impact on access to paid sick days across the country, particularly for low-wage workers. Congress should follow their lead and pass a long-overdue national standard that guarantees the right to earn paid sick leave,” said Hilary Wething, EPI economist and co-author of the report.

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