

A case for paid sick days

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Concerns over the recent swine influenza virus appear to be cooling for the moment, but this shouldn't mean that we stop thinking about how to prevent communicable disease. Influenza is an annual and tragic event: Each year, 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population gets seasonal influenza (the flu), more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and about 36,000 people die. Guaranteeing paid sick days to workers is an important step toward preventing spread of illness and promoting public health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention instructs people who get sick to stay home from work or school to keep from infecting others. For almost half of workers nationally, this is easier said than done. These workers, who do not earn any paid sick days, are asked to make an incredibly difficult choice: follow medical advice and lose pay or keep a job and potentially infect others.

On Monday, Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., and Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., will introduce the Healthy Families Act in Congress to guarantee paid sick days to all workers in the country. In California, lawmakers are already considering AB1000 to guarantee workers the right to paid sick day. The bill is co-authored by Assemblywomen Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco, and Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley.

For the nearly 6 million working Californians without paid sick days, taking time off from work can mean the loss of a day's pay or the loss of a good shift. Some workers have reported that they or a family member have been fired, suspended or disciplined for missing work due to illness. Workers should not have to put their jobs and financial security at stake to take care of a sick child or their own medical needs.

Whether we are trying to prevent swine flu, seasonal influenza or food-borne disease outbreaks in restaurants, not guaranteeing the right of all workers to earn and use paid sick days creates serious public health risks for all Californians.

Over the past two years, researchers in California, New York and elsewhere have been studying how having paid sick days affects health. A 2008 health impact assessment of the proposed California Paid Sick Days law found that paid sick days would likely benefit all Californians by reducing the spread of flu and protecting the public from communicable diseases carried by sick workers in restaurants and in nursing homes. With more than a third of flu cases transmitted in schools and workplaces, enabling strategies to help workers stay home when infected could avoid unnecessary health care costs and save lives.

The potential magnitude of epidemics of influenza and other communicable disease should help us all understand that the right to paid sick days is more than an employment benefit; it is, fundamentally, a

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strategy to protect the health of all Californians.

When workers can take needed time off without the loss of pay or fear of losing a job, the result is better health for workers and their families, decreased risk of the outbreak of disease and, ultimately, reduced health care spending.

Unfortunately, the United States remains alone among developed and prosperous Western nations in not guaranteeing this basic right for its workers. Let's prevent the spread of disease and enable workers to take care of themselves and their families, before it's too late.

Ellen Wu is the executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. Dr. Rajiv Bhatia is co-author of the 2008 health impact assessment of California's proposed Paid Sick Days law.

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