



What the FAMILY Act Means for Communities of Color

By Sarah Jane Glynn and Jane Farrell December 12, 2013

In many ways, families look the same today as they have for decades. People fall in love and get married. Babies are born, grow up, and start the cycle anew. Parents and family members age and often rely on care from others during their senior years. While the love that bonds family life has not changed over time, the way families live and work has. Most parents work, and most families rely on two incomes¹; more families are providing elder care as Baby Boomers age,² and 80 percent of children live in a household without a full-time stay-at-home caregiver.³ Families today do not love each other any less than in the past, but how families juggle work and family has changed dramatically—and workplace policies have not kept up.

The United States is the only advanced economy in the world that does not guarantee workers access to any form of paid leave.⁴ Without access to leave, individuals too often find themselves in a position where they have to choose between providing care for a loved one and bringing in enough money to cover rent, groceries, and basic household repairs. The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act, will help address this core issue facing working families today: the need to coordinate paid employment with unpaid caregiving in the home.⁵ While we pay a great deal of attention to the role of mothers as caregivers, even mothers themselves will at some point rely on partners, sons, daughters, or other relatives for care. As gender roles and families change and as Baby Boomers retire, everyone is increasingly likely to be a caregiver. The FAMILY Act will provide up to 12 weeks of leave with partial wage replacement to male and female workers after the birth of a new child, to recover from a serious illness, or to provide care for a seriously ill family member.

Access to family leave insurance is designed to benefit all workers, regardless of their gender, parental status, age, ability, or income level. While the program has universal benefits, there are also specific ways that it will benefit America's communities of color.

Workers of color—especially women—need paid leave

Despite fighting for and winning meaningful gains in employment and education, people of color—and women of color in particular—continue to face inequality in the workplace. Latinos and African Americans are still experiencing unemployment in the double digits—levels that are significantly higher than the national average.⁶ While women of color are just as likely to be part of the labor force as white women,⁷ they are also more likely to be single mothers, who must juggle the demands of work and family time without the aid of a partner.⁸ This makes paid leave all the more vital for single-parent households who have to support or care for families and singlehandedly cover day-to-day expenses. These responsibilities make it difficult to accrue wealth, particularly for single African American and Latina women with children who, according to a 2010 study, had a median household wealth of zero, putting their families at high risk of going into debt if they had to stay home with sick children.⁹

Women of color are becoming a greater share of the workforce and are playing an increasingly important role in our economy.¹⁰ Ensuring that they can earn paid maternity leave increases the likelihood that they will return to work after having a child and decreases their chances of having to rely upon social safety nets down the road.¹¹ Paid leave would also help increase women's overall lifetime earnings and decrease the gender wage gap, which is especially wide for women of color.¹² In 2012, American women made 77 cents for every \$1 a man earned, and African American and Latina women earned 64 cents and 55 cents, respectively, for every \$1 a non-Hispanic white man earned.¹³

African Americans and Latinos are less likely to have access to any type of leave

Decades of interpersonal and institutional racism continue to have an impact on employment patterns, which is largely why workers of color are disproportionately likely to work in low-wage, low-quality jobs. Since 2009—three years after the economic recovery from the Great Recession began—the number of Latinos and African Americans in minimum-wage jobs has increased by approximately 15 percent and 8 percent, respectively.¹⁴ While low-wage work makes up a large share of the jobs created in that time, these jobs rarely offer benefits that all workers need, such as paid sick days, health care, and paid family leave.¹⁵ Workers in low-wage jobs may also juggle multiple jobs, working part time at multiple business establishments; this excludes them from earning job-protected leave under the current Family and Medical Leave Act, or FMLA, because they may not have worked enough hours or been employed at one business for more than a year.¹⁶ The FAMILY Act would ensure that all workers—low-wage, middle-class, and higher-income workers alike—have the same opportunities to earn paid leave by tying benefits to lifetime employment history, not specific employers.¹⁷

Latinos are the least likely of any group to have access to paid sick days, paid parental leave, paid vacation, and workplace flexibility. Just one in four Latinos has access to paid parental leave, meaning that families risk losing a paycheck or falling into poverty at the same time they are welcoming newborns into the world.¹⁸

Workers of color are more likely to be in low-wage or part-time jobs that make saving for leave more challenging

The same low-wage jobs that fail to offer benefits also make saving for unexpected and expected expenses increasingly difficult.¹⁹ Even if a worker is employed full time at the minimum wage, he or she will only earn \$15,080 per year, approximately \$7,000 below the poverty line for a family of four.²⁰ Household incomes for African Americans fell by more than 7 percent from 2007 to 2009, and both African American and Latino families have poverty rates of more than 23 percent, compared to just 9.4 percent for Asian Americans and 7.1 percent for whites.²¹ Given these economic hardships, these workers and their families struggle to save money for planned or unexpected leave.

Workers of color in low-wage jobs are also less likely to have access to workplace flexibility. Since these jobs are largely in the service sector, workers cannot telecommute while caring for newborns or seriously ill loved ones or work from home while recovering from their own illnesses. Moreover, they are less likely to have access to flexible scheduling, which might permit them to alter their hours in order to care for elderly parents.²²

Conclusion

The FAMILY Act will help lift our entire economy by providing a vital and earned benefit for workers of every background, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, parental status, age, ability, or income level.²³ It is impossible to predict what challenges individuals will face down the road, but supporting them with paid family leave is an important first step to ensure that these hardships do not spill over and negatively impact their families and our economy.

Endnotes

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