This issue brief is part of a six-part series from the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, which outlines value-based policies that benefit all American families. For more information on our Real Family Values series, visit our project page.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Family Medical Leave Act, a landmark bill that President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1993. The law, which President Clinton called “a matter of pure common sense and a matter of common decency,” was a huge victory for American families. It gave legal weight to the timeless value of family caregiving, ensuring that workers at companies with 50 or more employees would be guaranteed 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave to care for a new baby or sick family member.

But while the FMLA was a major step in the right direction, it has not kept pace with a changing America. Although unpaid leave is useful for some workers, roughly 40 percent of the nation’s workforce still does not qualify for the benefits of the law. In addition, many who do qualify cannot afford to take unpaid leave. Going without a paycheck for 12 weeks is simply not an option for millions of American workers despite the urgent needs of their families.

This affront to American families could be rectified with a simple solution that reaffirms the value of caregiving: federal legislation that provides employees with paid family leave. One such proposal is the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or FAMILY Act, a forthcoming bill that is set to be introduced to Congress this year. It would provide eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of partial wage replacement for their own serious illness; the serious illness of a child, parent, or spouse, including a domestic partner; the birth or adoption of a child; the injury of a family member who is in the military; or urgent needs arising from a service member’s deployment.

Such a policy is smart, effective, and moral, and has been embraced by most of the world. In fact, the United States is one of only a handful of countries that do not yet guarantee paid maternity leave for workers, putting it alongside significantly less wealthy nations such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Papua New Guinea.
Three U.S. states—California, New Jersey, and most recently, Rhode Island—successfully passed paid family leave laws for their residents. But state-based solutions are not enough. If we are to make good on our nation’s promise to be a society that cares about community—especially families—then we need to pass a federal law that affords all Americans workers with the opportunity to care for newborn children and sick loved ones.

With this in mind, the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative has consulted with ethicists, economists, and faith-based advocates to identify three core family values that are upheld and strengthened by expanding access to paid family leave: caregiving, justice, and health.

### The value of caregiving

At the root of strong families—no matter how they are configured—is an embrace of caregiving as a core family value. Whether it is a working father taking time off to care for his newborn or a working woman taking leave to help care for an ill parent, the vast majority of Americans understand caregiving and policies that support caregiving as a given for living in a community. In fact, a National Partnership for Women & Families exit poll conducted during the 2012 election found that 96 percent of Democrats and 72 percent of Republicans considered it very or somewhat important that the federal government consider new laws to keep families economically secure—including creating a system of insurance that would fund paid family leave.9

Unfortunately, while most Americans value providing for others as a key part of family life, the policies of many employers essentially prohibit workers from taking time to care for their families: Only about 10 percent of workers in the United States have access to paid family leave that denotes caregiving as a reason for time off.10

“Caregiving is not deemed ‘important’ work, and, economically speaking, it’s not valued,” said Gloria Albrecht, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Detroit, Mercy, in an interview with the Center for American Progress. “Businesses want employees that are unencumbered by dependents.”

But it does not have to be this way. Implementing policies such as paid family leave can help businesses respect the public’s widespread support for caregiving and can change business culture for the better. As The Atlantic reported in July, academics such as Shelley Correll and Stephen Benard have argued that passing paid family leave laws changes how people think about those who take time off for family reasons, leading bosses and co-workers to abandon negative opinions about employees who take maternity, paternity, or other caregiving-related leave.12 According to The Atlantic, Correll’s research shows that these work-culture shifts can create a more equal environment for workers who take paid leave, as the presence of the new laws is proven to “influence positively managers’ assessments of and decisions about leave-taking employees—for example, whether they later deserve raises or promotions.”
While policies such as paid family leave are often framed as explicitly women’s issues, the benefits extend to men as well. Offering paid leave to fathers leads to greater paternal involvement in a child’s life over time, creating a pattern of parenting that is more equally shared between mothers and fathers. Paid leave can be a godsend for male parents in same-sex marriages, as well as for men who head up single-parent households or who have seriously ill children.

Paid leave also allows Americans to make good on our collective promise to care for our sick and elderly when they are in need. In addition to wanting to care for their own relatives, lower-income families often cannot afford professional caretakers for ill family members. As such, many end up having to provide care on their own, effectively forcing them to take unpaid leave or even quit their jobs to tend to the needs of a parent, child, or spouse. Offering paid family leave could help end this vicious cycle of poverty and guarantee all Americans—regardless of income—the right to care for their loved ones in times of need.

Paid family leave is a justice issue

At the core of the American psyche is a deeply rooted belief in justice and equality. From Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr. to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, our most celebrated leaders have been those who have stood up for the vulnerable, championing justice and equality for all Americans, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, skin color, or income. The lack of universal family leave is an affront to these values, perpetuating injustice and disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable in our society. While the FMLA granted millions of Americans access to unpaid family leave, about 40 percent of U.S. workers still do not qualify for the benefits of the law. Worse, the Department of Labor reports that nearly half of workers who qualify for unpaid family leave cannot afford to take the time off, and two-thirds of those who did take leave said that it hurt their family financially. In addition, although wealthier families are better able to shoulder lost wages while taking unpaid leave by relying on other forms of income such as extensive savings or financially leaning on a spouse with high income, a 2013 Center for Law and Social Policy analysis found that poorer families often saw their incomes vanish while taking time off to care for loved ones. The study also reported that 54 percent of workers earning less than the median national family income reported losing all of their income while taking unpaid leave.

The absence of paid leave also has an inordinate effect on people of color and ultimately promotes racial inequality. Households headed by women of color are more likely to be struggling financially. While the American Time Use Survey shows that workers of color are more apt to need time off for various reasons, the FMLA’s job-tenure and employer-size requirements means that nonwhite workers are also more likely to be
ineligible for job-protected leave. Latinas are also unlikely to have access to paid leave; only 32.6 percent of Hispanic women have access to a paid paternal family leave, compared to about 50.2 percent of white women.

A nation without paid family leave is also one that hurts women and children. Although women are the primary breadwinners for most lower-income families, many struggle to return to work: Among new mothers who had to quit their jobs to care for their newborn child, less than half—48.2 percent—returned to work within a year. This deprives lower-income families of much-needed funds and can deny working mothers and their children access to basic nutrition. Meanwhile, allowing for paid leave makes women far more likely to return to employment later. As a consequence, countries that allow for longer paid maternity leave typically enjoy lower child poverty rates, creating a richer, healthier environment for kids.

Furthermore, the absence of family leave insurance unfairly hurts workers who fall ill or get hurt. In 2001, 25 percent of dual-income couples and 13 percent of single-parent families who filed for bankruptcy did so after having to miss two or more weeks of work due to personal illness or the illness of a family member.

“If we really take seriously the call to care for the poor and people on the margins, low income people who can least afford to take time off from work without pay should be the first to get it—not the last,” said Edith Rasell, economist and minister of economic justice for the United Church of Christ, in an interview with CAP.

Producing healthier families

All families deserve the chance to raise healthy kids. Healthy families are productive families, and in a country such as the United States, there is simply no excuse for allowing families and children to suffer because parents cannot afford to offer care to their own children.

Yet they do suffer. Because lower-income families usually do not have access to family leave, working parents are confronted with a cruel choice: either stay home to provide needed family care and lose a much-needed paycheck or stay on the job despite urgent family needs. This painful choice erodes the emotional and physical well-being of millions of American families. Not only does the lack of family leave keep many parents from caring for an ill loved one or bearing witness to a newborn’s precious first days, but it also negatively impacts the long-term health of children and parents; in some cases, it delays babies’ immunizations and causes postpartum depression in mothers.
By contrast, granting employees access to paid family leave is proven to create healthier families. According to a 2005 study published in *The Economic Journal*, newborns with mothers who were financially able to take at least 12 weeks of leave were more likely to receive medical checkups and get critical immunizations. In addition, the study found that taking an additional 10 weeks reduces post-neonatal mortality by an average of 4.5 percent. Mothers are also more likely to breastfeed for longer if they take paid leave, a practice many believe can have numerous long-term health benefits for mothers and children.

### Conclusion

The issue of paid family goes to the heart of how we understand family. When confronted with our shared values around caregiving, justice, and health, most Americans agree that our businesses have a duty to afford families the chance to care for loved ones. All American families—rich, poor, single parent, multi parent, and of any racial makeup—should enjoy basic protections that allow them to raise a family without being forced to endure unnecessary and unjust workplace complications.

Paid family leave is ultimately about bringing policy in line with the American people’s willingness to care for others.

“There is a perfect human symmetry between this larger human family and particular families—parents and children,” said Rev. Michael Livingston, public policy director for the Washington, D.C., office of Interfaith Worker Justice, in an interview with CAP.

“Justice for working families [by implementing paid family leave] is about a concern for our larger human family.”

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Endnotes


4 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


25 Glynn, "Fact Sheet: Paid Family and Medical Leave.


27 Boushey and Glynn, "The Many Benefits of Paid Family and Medical Leave.”

