

Public Welfare
FOUNDATION

updates

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OUR MISSION

The Public Welfare Foundation supports efforts to ensure fundamental rights and opportunities for people in need. We look for carefully defined points where our funds can make a difference in bringing about systemic changes that can improve the lives of countless people.

An Antidote to Swine Flu: Paid Sick Days

Recent alerts and guidelines that have been issued in anticipation of the resurgence of the H1N1 flu (or swine flu) – including the highest alert level from the World Health Organization in June – have American families scrambling to figure out how to deal with the threat of a serious disease or pandemic. This is particularly true for the more than 40 percent of private sector workers – and 75 percent of low-wage workers – who do not have paid sick leave.

“Workers without paid sick days lose wages if they stay home, and many workers risk losing their jobs. As a result, workers who lack paid sick time are more likely to go to work with a communicable illness, and parents who cannot stay home with a sick child are more likely to send sick children to school or day care,” said Kevin P. Miller, Senior Research Associate for the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) based in Washington, DC. “Workers who work in direct contact with the public, such as restaurant workers, child care workers, and hotel employees, are among the least likely to have paid sick days.”

A [survey](#) by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, commissioned by the Foundation last year, found that 68 percent of people who did not have paid sick days responded “yes” when asked, “Have you ever had to go to work when you were sick with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection?” That was a significantly higher affirmative response than among those who were eligible for paid sick days.

“Government leaders and public health officials stress the importance of staying home when you’re sick to avoid spreading the H1N1 virus,” notes Deborah Leff, president of the Public Welfare Foundation. “But most low-income American workers lack even one day of paid sick leave, so the economic realities undermine public health concerns.”

In Milwaukee, WI, where more than 3,000 people have had the H1N1 flu, and only 47 percent of workers are entitled to paid sick days, many working parents have already had to make hard decisions that could have compromised public health, according to Public Welfare Foundation grantee 9to5.

Sangita Nayak, lead organizer for the group in Milwaukee, reported in a piece recently published by the Progressive Media Project that back in May, when 20,000 children were shut out of schools with less than a day’s notice, at least one woman continued to work at her temp job despite thinking that she had caught H1N1 from her child. Another woman who was sick with a fever for more than 10

days continued to work for fear of losing her fast-food job. And a third woman lost essential income when her child came down with H1N1 and the entire family was quarantined by the health department. Without paid sick days, she was forced to work double shifts the rest of the month to make sure the family's bills were covered.

"We should not have to choose between a pandemic and a paycheck," said Nayak.

Last November, Milwaukee voters passed a referendum that would provide workers up to nine paid sick days a year, depending on the number of hours worked and the size of the business. Despite a nearly 70 percent favorable vote, the referendum is being challenged in court by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Association of Commerce, a prominent local business group. At the federal level, Congress is considering the Healthy Families Act, which would provide up to seven paid sick days annually to workers in businesses with 15 employees or more.

On August 19, 2009, top government officials, including Homeland Security Chief Janet Napolitano and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, said at a press conference that workers with flu symptoms should be encouraged to stay home and remain there at least 24 hours after they no longer have a fever. The most recent guidance for the upcoming flu season from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other federal agencies suggests that the nation's 130,000 public and private schools remain open, but that those among the approximately 55 million children in grades K-12 who have the flu or flu-like symptoms should stay home. That advice can be followed more easily when working parents can use paid sick days to remain home and care for their children.

It's also an important consideration since younger people, including working parents and their young children, have been more susceptible to the recent strain of H1N1 flu than the elderly. Dr. Tom W. Smith, a Senior Fellow at NORC and the director of last year's survey, finds that there is a definite relationship between paid sick days and individual and general well-being. "The survey shows that when you don't have paid sick days, you are more likely to go to work when you don't feel well -- and that clearly has a negative impact on public health," he said.

For additional information, please go to:

[Institute for Women's Policy Research](#)
[9to5: National Association of Working Women](#)
[National Partnership for Women & Families](#)
[Family Values at Work](#)
[MomsRising](#)
[Public Welfare Foundation](#)

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