Even though the vast majority of Massachusetts residents possess financial access to regular doctor visits and medical attention, millions are unable to take advantage of this right. Indeed, 45 percent of private-sector employees lack a single guaranteed paid sick day, useable for doctor visits or at-home recovery in the event of illness. An even greater percentage of workers are unable to take off from work to care for an ill child or elderly parent. For many of these workers the loss of a day’s wages is detrimental to their family’s financial well-being; as a result, they forego necessary medical attention and arrive at work sick and contagious – a threat to public health.

The Bill

Final Draft H01398: “Massachusetts Paid Leave Act”

Op-Ed Piece

The clock strikes 6 A.M., and you’ve woken up feeling like you were hit by a train. Your head pounds. You’ve got the chills. Lumps the size and consistency of golf balls adorn either side of your neck.

We’ve all been there, and it ain’t fun.

Any doctor (or mom) will likely give you the same advice: rest, rest, rest. Drink your fluids. Take an Advil.

The advice of employers, on the other hand, will be more varied. Some will suggest their workers follow the doctor’s orders. And others – hundreds of thousands of others, in fact – will offer their employees a different set of instructions. In the best-case scenario: suck it up, or you won’t be paid. In the worst-case scenario: suck it up, or you won’t have a job here by the time you recover.

Indeed, roughly 1,404,000 private-sector workers in Massachusetts (that’s about 42 percent of the state’s workforce) are not guaranteed a single paid sick day by their employers. For many of these workers,
the loss of one day’s wages means not being able to make
the rent or buy enough food to feed their family. The
result? Many must forgo their own recovery from illness,
send a sick child to school, or leave an ailing elderly parent
at home alone.

This is a grave injustice, not to mention a serious
public health concern. The swine flu scare brought this
issue to public attention when schools, the most prominent
contexts of contagion, complained of parents sending
their children to school while ill. Employees, too, were
coming to work while under the weather, prompting many
Massachusetts businesses to initiate “emergency” paid
sick leave. Does it really make sense to wait until the next
mediatized public health crisis to pass this kind of reform
permanently?

The Paid Sick Day Act, drafted by Senator Pat Jehlen
and Representative Kay Kahn, ensures that no employee
needs to choose between putting food on the table and
caring for themselves or their children when ill. It would
entitle every worker in Massachusetts one hour of paid
sick leave for every thirty hours worked, for a maximum
of seven paid sick days annually. The days would not carry
over to subsequent years.

The Act should receive a hearing in the Labor and
Workforce Development committee in the coming weeks.
Despite the common-sense nature of this bill, critics are
concerned that the bill puts unfair pressure on employers,
particularly in today’s economic climate. However,
sickness spreads, and sickness untreated worsens. This
translates to significant costs to employers in the form of
absent employees, lower productivity, and worker turnover.
One study estimates that Massachusetts employers will
save $130,000,000 annually following the institution of
paid sick leave.

Everyone benefits from paid sick leave. Individuals can
afford to recover. Parents can afford to stay at home to care
for a sick child. Communities become less vulnerable to
the spread of disease. Employers have happier employees,
higher levels of productivity, and lower rates of worker
turnover. The state’s overwhelmed health care system
receives a break because untreated minor illnesses can lead
to serious conditions, which often necessitate expensive
medical interventions.

If you feel passionate about workers’ rights or public
health, The Paid Sick Days Act is worth your attention.
Take action: call your representatives and tell them why
their support matters to you.

Because, frankly, mom knows best: if you’re under the
weather, rest is the answer. And maybe a little chicken
noodle soup.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Madeleine

From meeting with Senator Barry Finegold’s Chief of Staff

This was my and Rebecca’s first meeting with a legislative
aide, so we were pretty nervous, although her open and
kind demeanor put us at ease. She told us that Finegold
didn’t committed his support for the bill because, as a
small business owner himself, he was concerned about
the financial pressures associated with mandated paid
sick leave. As such, we adjusted our “legislative script” to
address the cost-saving side of paid sick leave. Thankfully,
we also brought a copy of the Institute for Women’s Policy
Research report on the effects of mandated paid sick leave
on businesses in San Francisco (the report talks about
how there was virtually no negative effect on businesses
following the implementation of paid sick leave). We also
brought the Institute for Women’s Policy Research’s report
on the cost-saving aspects of paid sick leave – mainly its
potential to reduce turnover and raise productivity. We
left both reports with her. On a side note: I wish we had
reports from other sources, since the Institute for Women’s
Policy Research has a known liberal agenda; it would have
been helpful to have a report or testimonials from business
owners who offer paid sick leave themselves.

Also helpful was bringing in research relative to
Finegold’s district [thank you, citydata.com!]. We found out
that one of the cities in his district, Lawrence, has one of
the highest percentages of households run by single parents
[52% of homes, and number 36 on a list of 101 cities with
the most single-parent households]. The aide responded
very well to these statistics and wrote them down in a
notebook. We also had statistics to show that Lawrence
had a high number of people working in construction and
food service – industries in which workers are least likely
to receive paid sick leave. The woman later told us that
Finegold “loves fact-driven data,” so these district-specific
data pieces were key to our conversation.

Rebecca

Our “lobbying day” was complicated and confusing every
step of the way. We weren’t sure if we would be messing
up some secret plan of the paid leave coalition if we spoke
to the wrong legislators, so we wanted to ask Elizabeth
Toulon who she thought we should talk to first. We tried
for over a week and could not get in touch with her. So,
we called up the coalition’s second-in-command, Chrissy
Long. I was sincerely taken aback by how straightforward
and no-nonsense Chrissy was even on the phone, and
immediately felt stupid for calling her. Matter-of-factly, she told us we should talk to anyone on the labor and workforce development committee. Maddy tried to make appointments to meet with legislators or their aides, and people were really confused about why non-constituents were trying to meet with them anyway. We struggled to figure out how to sound important.

Overall, we found the aides fairly easy to talk to. We spoke with Representative Rogers’ aide, Chris Allen, who had not even heard of the Paid Leave Act. It was so exhilarating to be able to inform him, and have reasonable answers for his questions. However, we forgot to print out enough copies of the reports, so I felt stupid talking about the report with nothing to hand him.

Numbers and solid facts were visibly the most effective. Mr. Allen even took down some notes on the things we were saying. As frustrating and time consuming as it is, I guess finding the numbers really is that important.

We were really excited to speak with Rogers’ office because John Rogers happens to be a Brandeis alum. However, this didn’t seem as thrilling to the aide as it did to us. The thing that worked the best here was telling the truth and admitting we were human. Maddy and I told the aide that we were students, and were new at this whole lobbying thing. We politely apologized for being a bit flustered and disoriented. He seemed to relax a little bit more when we told him this as well. So I guess it’s okay to be human sometimes.

**Update (July 2011)**

In June 2011, Connecticut became the first state to pass legislation requiring businesses (with 50 or more employees) to provide paid sick leave to their workers. In July, the Massachusetts Legislature’s Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development held a hearing on the Massachusetts bill.

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