An Act establishing earned paid sick time seeks to protect the rights of hard workers in Massachusetts to seek medical care and take care of their sick loved ones during times of illness. The bill systemizes ‘earned paid sick time’ and ‘earned unpaid sick time’ to allow employees to earn one hour of sick time for every 30 hours worked to ensure that employees would not be fired, threatened, and punished for missing work.

Earned Paid Sick Time

Allow Massachusetts workers to earn paid sick time

The Bill

H.1739: An Act establishing earned paid sick time

Op-Ed

4:00 AM: Wake up in Waltham, with the fluid in my lungs rising as swiftly as I do. Shower, shampoo, and slip on the chef jacket with the last pack of Emergen-C in hand.

4:30 AM: Speed down Western Ave. in Allston. Stop in at 7-Eleven for one last surge of Vitamin-C in the form of orange juice and tissues. Exchange niceties with the clerk while clearing my nose and throat of lingering phlegm.

4:45 AM: Punch in. Set up the bakery, and periodically bathe in Purell and hand soap until shift ends.

12:00 PM: Punch out. Run down the block to Shaw’s and grab another box of Emergen-C before class starts.

This wasn’t my daily routine, but during the last stretch of the cold and flu season from February through April of last year, it became a ritual that verged on cultish. I chose this job because the early mornings fit my busy afternoon schedule, and calling out was simply not an option. Beyond the utmost understanding façade of the service business, there is always retribution to be had for such actions. My former employer rued any scenario where they might become a “social institution” an umbrella term of which I was reminded regularly. As a result, I had no problem keeping a personable demeanor as the morning breakfast crowd

Annie Chen ’14
Marino Pawlowski ’14
drifted in and out, but none of them knew that our sneeze guards may as well have been double sided.

This editorial, however, does not seek to reprimand my employers for anything any malfeasance aside from what is currently being argued at the state level. House Bill No. 1739, An Act establishing earned paid sick time, has been argued among representatives for the past year. At the cut-off last month it was pushed to the end of July for a final verdict. The importance of this legislation is intuitive for any line of work, but particularly for food service, where the public health is put at the greatest risk. Not surprisingly, the largest opponent of the bill is the upper management of restaurant industry, fearful of providing its workers with the coverage that has already been shown to boost productivity and morale of workers in our neighboring Connecticut. Unfortunately, Massachusetts has not yet built immunity to the greed of capital gain. The issue trails behind other equally important rights of a worker, such as a raised minimum wage. We must not forget that earned sick time is also relevant, even if the results are not as immediately gratifying. If this bill gets lost in the fold, then its legislators must begin from nothing again next year, and this momentum will come to a standstill. That’s another cold and flu season where each Massachusetts resident who eats out has to question the journey of his or her food from pot to plate.

If you can look back on your last visit to McDonalds, Bertucci’s, or even a high-profile establishment on Newbury Street where your server might have been showing signs of illness, you can see the necessity of this bill. Tell your local representative that the warm temperatures of summer should not cloud their judgment in the feverish winter months. As for businesses, a few honest words on their carefully curated “social institution” within the bubble of Yelp, Urbanspoon, and Facebook will undoubtedly cure their bouts of delirium.

Marino

In the past few months, I have immersed myself into the world of earned sick time legislation with my project partner, wherein we researched the issue with a multilateral approach, utilizing political sources as well as labor organizations. While there is support for the house bill, and many of the representatives gave the impression that their support for this legislation was intuitive, I was unable to find coalitions that focused solely or even specifically on earned sick time. This is understandable, as our visits to the State House were more focused on keeping the issue on the consciousness of the legislators rather than advocating for it.

While it seemed that this bill was cut and dried from a legislative perspective, my conversations and correspondence outside the State House was more sobering. My reflection will look at three issues, the first being an analysis of the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development, as well as my attempt to correspond with RaiseUp Massachusetts and Local 26, a Boston-based hospitality industry union that is present on the Brandeis campus through our dining services workers. In summation, this journal is a reflection on the role of an advocate to aid in bringing groups together, particularly for issues like earned sick time, which are relevant but inevitably trail behind more ambitious workers rights initiatives, like the minimum wage legislation.

... Overall, this campaign journey has taught me the importance of an advocate. After attempting to meet with coalitions and speaking with a workers union, it has become evident that the workings of the State House are well intentioned, but very isolated from the typical Commonwealth resident, even those who it would benefit. If given the opportunity to start from the beginning, I would have tried to work more with the coalition and union to spark more interest in the issue. With more support, this bill can be voted out of Ways and Means.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Annie

It seems like obvious policy, that if a child is sick, they should be kept from school to recover. Temporarily removing them from the classroom safeguards the health of other children…Knowing this, Massachusetts's legislators continue to delay passing policy that would allow hardworking parents to earn time off to care for their children's health…Every person who has a kid or knows a kid [should] contact their Massachusetts representative today about the Earned Paid Sick Time Act…

Update

As of September 12, 2014, H.1739/S.900 was in the Senate Ways and Means Committee. This issue is scheduled to appear on the November 2014 ballot.

For more information

Massachusetts Paid Leave Coalition
www.masspaidleave.org