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Washington Post

That's a question being taken up by a growing number of cities and states in recent months, as advocacy groups and business organizations spar over whether the benefit should be required by law or remain a perk businesses choose to offer employees.

Staff writer Jena McGregor teases out the leadership issues in the day's news.

The debate in Philadelphia follows recent wins for paid sick leave supporters in Portland, Ore., which passed an ordinance March 13, as well as in New York, which on March 28 became the fifth major city to require that businesses provide ill workers with paid time off. (San Francisco, D.C., Seattle and the state of Connecticut also have laws in place.)

The measure is gaining enough interest nationally that one observer called paid sick leave “the new must-support issue for ambitious Democrats across the nation,” especially after New York City council speaker and Democratic mayoral candidate Christine Quinn conceded on the issue after opposing it for three years.

How many more local governments will pass similar laws is unclear. But New York was seen as a “tipping point,” says Debra L. Ness, president of the National Partnership for Women and Families, which has been leading campaigns supporting their passage. She believes it could prompt action at more of the nearly 20 other states and cities where campaigns to enact paid sick leave ordinances are active or recently have been. “If you can make it work in New York, with the diversity and the sheer numbers [of employees], you can make it work anywhere.”

Local changes do, at least, seem more likely than changes at the federal level. The Healthy Families Act, which would mandate paid sick leave nationally, has been introduced every year since 2004 to no avail yet.

Why all the recent activity on a benefit so many workers already take for granted? Currently, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, 34 percent of civilian workers — many of them low-wage hourly workers in the service sector or who work for small businesses — do not receive paid sick leave as a benefit from their employers.

Supporters say there are several reasons the measure is gaining traction. For one, the struggling economy has put new emphasis on the challenges low-wage workers face when they have to call in sick and their pay suffers as a result. In addition, the recent celebration of the Family and Medical Leave Act's 20th anniversary, Ness says, was a reminder to lawmakers of the impact of similar measures. And now that initiatives have been in place for a few years in some locales — San Francisco was first, in 2007, and Connecticut passed its legislation in 2011 — supporters say

the results have helped to shape others' opinion. "None of the 'sky is falling' horror stories have come to pass," Ness says.

Critics oppose mandating paid sick leave because they say it will cost jobs or lower wages if businesses are forced to take on the extra financial burden. "If they could afford it, they would," says Helen Darling, president of the National Business Group on Health.

Other organizations that oppose the measures include the National Restaurant Association and the National Federation of Independent Business. "Making paid sick leave mandatory is problematic," NFIB senior vice president for public policy Susan Eckerly emailed me in a statement. "It forces small businesses operating with narrow profit margins — or even losses — to sacrifice productivity and sales, which will ultimately result in job losses and business closures."

"I've got a woman's ability to stick to a job and get on with it when everyone else walks off and leaves it."

Still, some business groups do support paid sick leave laws. The Oregon affiliate of the Main Street Alliance, for instance, as well as VOIS, Portland's "sustainable business community," encouraged passage of the city's Earned Sick Time Ordinance. In a report the two groups put together to increase support, they applauded the measure as something that helps businesses increase employee retention, improve productivity and protect the public health of customers. (According to one study the groups cited, 81 percent of workers in the food service industry in Portland do not have the opportunity to earn paid sick time). The report concluded: "Establishing a standard for earned paid sick time in Portland is not just good policy for workers and families. It makes good business sense, too."

And while bigger businesses that already offer the benefit to employees may not be as vocal in their praise, they're not that vocal in their opposition either, notes Garry Mathiason of employment law firm Littler Mendelson. He says he has watched initial controversy over the ordinance in San Francisco, where he is based, "fall off the radar," as the changes were not seen as being all that onerous once enacted. In addition, big companies seemed happy enough to keep quiet and watch as their competitors were forced to provide the benefit as well.

"Larger employers [felt] they're at a competitive disadvantage because they do provide paid sick leave," Mathiason says. "Their silence was really very loud."

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