

# Celebrate Labor Day by supporting national paid family leave

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By Sheryl Sandberg and Rachel Thomas September 1

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None of us should have to choose between the job we need and the family we love. That's the concept behind paid family leave. It provides a safety net for when life happens — when a baby arrives, a child falls ill, an aging parent needs extra care — and we need to be there. And because it provides income during that time, it's a game-changer for workers living paycheck to paycheck.

On Monday, Americans will celebrate Labor Day. It's a chance to recommit to supporting the workers who help make our country strong. One of the most important ways we can do this is by passing [national paid family leave](#).

Right now, only about [60 percent](#) of the U.S. workforce has access to unpaid leave thanks to the [Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993](#). That was a breakthrough law, but it was just a first step. It leaves out millions of workers. It doesn't cover the range of family and medical issues that we all face in life. And it's unpaid, which means nearly half of workers who qualify say they can't afford to use it.

Furthermore, while a [growing number of companies](#) have stepped up to offer paid leave, the benefits overwhelmingly go to workers with professional degrees. The people who need paid leave the most are the least likely to get it — those working minimum-wage jobs, those with high school degrees or less. This is unacceptable.

Some will say that paid leave hurts business. The data say otherwise. In [California](#), which has had paid family leave since 2002, 91 percent of employers say the program has either boosted profits and performance or had no effect at all. And it's good for our economy as a whole. The Labor Department [estimates](#) that if American women participated in the workforce at the same levels they do in Canada and Germany — which offer paid leave — we would add \$500 billion to our economy every year.

Some will say, let's leave this to the states — and indeed, a handful of states have led the way. In the past 15 years, California, Rhode Island, Washington, New Jersey, New York, and the District of Columbia have enacted paid leave. But there are still 45 states left to go. At this rate, it will take more than a century to cover all workers. Some problems require a national solution. This is one of them.

Some will say paid leave benefits only women — which is another way of saying it's not that important to everyone. It's true that women are often the ones who take care of children and aging parents, and they deserve time to do both. It's also true that the United States is the only developed country without paid maternity leave. American women aren't even guaranteed a single paid day off to give birth. Meanwhile, mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners in more than 40 percent of households. When their incomes drop or they lose their jobs, their families pay the price.

But paid leave benefits men, too. Since the introduction of paid leave in California, the number of men who have used it to care for their children has more than doubled. And 3 in 4 fathers say they want to spend more time with their kids. Men deserve the chance to care for the people who matter to them. We all do.

There's a national paid leave plan before the Congress right now — the Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act, or Family Act, sponsored by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro (D.-Conn.). It provides for 12 weeks of paid time off to care for new children or seriously ill or injured family members, address one's own serious health condition, or help a military family adjust to a loved one's deployment. It applies to all workers nationwide, no matter their job or employer. It's sustainably and responsibly funded through payroll taxes. And it offers income reimbursement substantial enough that low-wage and middle-class workers can afford to use it.

One advocate told us that she realized just how important paid leave is when her son was hospitalized. She spent every minute by his side — her workplace had a paid-leave program that allowed her to do that. In the next bed was a very sick 4-year-old boy who spent all day alone. His parents showed up after he was asleep, and could stay only a few hours. They both worked long shifts and neither could afford to take time off from work. Paid leave would have meant everything to that family — and millions more.

Seventy percent of small businesses support the Family Act. And more than 70 percent of Democrats and Republicans support paid leave in general. They support it because it's good for workers and families. It's good for our economy. But more importantly, it says something powerful about who we are as a country — that we look out for one another, that we're all in this together. That's what Labor Day is all about. It's time to get this done.

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