Paid Family & Medical Leave Program for Virginia

New report highlights the role a state PFML program can play in advancing health & economic equity

RICHMOND, VA – As Virginia policymakers discuss how to address racial health disparities, consideration should be given to the intersection of labor policy and public health. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how lack of access to paid family and medical leave (PFML) can impact families and communities. Many individuals have been forced to choose between staying home to care for themselves and their family or going to work to pay for basic needs. This difficult decision can not only impact the health of one person, but the larger community as well.

A new report from The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, Statewide PFML: A Critical Step Toward Racial, Economic, and Health Equity, details the unequal access to paid family or medical leave for people of color and workers with low incomes. The report also discusses the impact that a state-run program could have on ensuring equitable access to paid leave, which would allow more working people in Virginia the opportunity to take time off to care for themselves, a loved one, or a new addition to the family.

“Currently, access to paid family and medical leave is left largely to employer policies. Unfortunately, this system leaves many people with low wages without options when needing to take extended time off because of a health emergency or welcoming a child into their family. Families earning low wages may need to decide between earning income to pay for basic needs or taking time off to manage a health crisis. No one should be forced to make that decision,” said Freddy Mejia, health policy analyst and author of the report.

Among the report’s key findings:

- 84% of registered voters in Virginia support a 12-week paid family and medical leave policy that all working people would be able to access.
- Across the country, only 4% of the lowest-wage workers have access to paid family leave compared to 31% of the highest-paid workers.
- Similarly, only 11% of the lowest-wage workers have access to paid medical leave in the form of short-term disability insurance compared to 67% for the highest-paid workers.
In Virginia, 67% and 57% of Latinx and Black workers, respectively, are either ineligible or cannot afford to take unpaid leave through the protections provided by the Family and Medical Leave Act.

The report encourages the governor and Virginia state legislators to enact a statewide paid family and medical leave program during the 2021 General Assembly session and build on past proposals to craft a program that works best for workers in the commonwealth.


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