

# A HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF PAID SICK DAYS IN MAINE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS • NOVEMBER 16, 2009



The ability of workers to earn and use paid sick days when ill or when a family member needs care would significantly benefit the health of all people in Maine. However, over 40% of the workforce in the state—almost 250,000 workers—do not have any paid sick days.

Maine and federal lawmakers are considering policies that would guarantee that workers in the state accrue paid sick time: workers would earn paid sick time for every hour they work. In the fall of 2009, Human Impact Partners conducted research regarding the health impacts of such a policy in order to supplement research on a similar federal bill, evaluating how the law could protect and improve public health. This report summarizes the findings of that research.

**The best available public health evidence demonstrates that the paid sick days legislation would have significant positive public health impacts.** Guaranteed paid sick days would reduce the spread of pandemic and seasonal flu; reduce emergency room usage; protect the public from diseases carried by sick workers in restaurants and nursing homes; and enable workers to stay home when they are sick or need to care for a sick dependent. Paid sick days could also prevent hunger and homelessness among sick, low-income workers and increase the use of primary or preventative care.

Figures 1 and 2 show examples of potential negative health outcomes associated with a worker without paid sick days becoming ill and either choosing to go to work or take time off. In both scenarios, there are potential negative health outcomes for the worker, coworkers, and customers, including additional people becoming sick, longer recovery times, hospitalization, need for additional medical care, and the health effects associated with lost wages and unemployment.

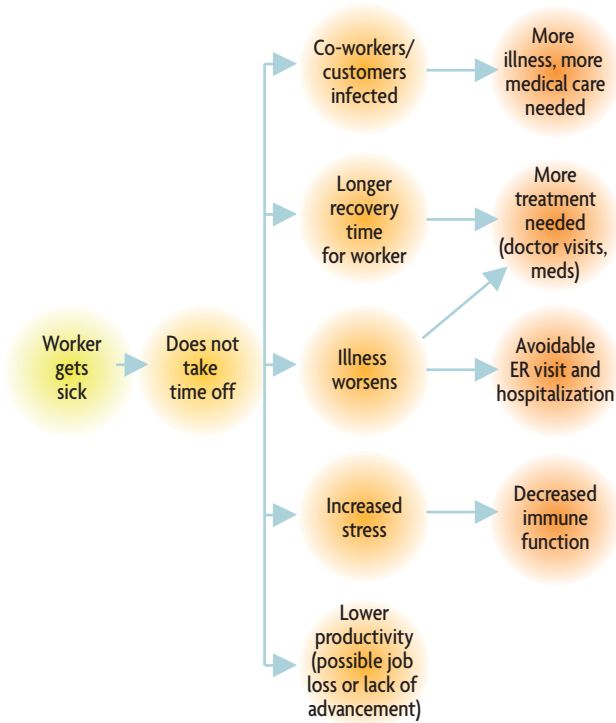


Figure 1. Taking no time off when sick: examples of potential negative health outcomes.

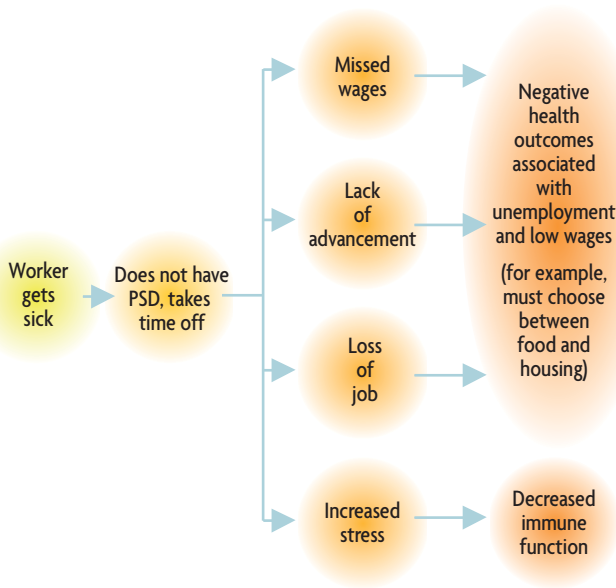


Figure 2. Taking time off when sick, without paid sick days: examples of potential negative health outcomes.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

*“Stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick.”*

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

To prepare for an influenza pandemic, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends that every employer should “develop a sick leave policy that does not penalize sick employees, thereby encouraging employees who have influenza-related symptoms . . . to stay home so that they do not infect other employees.”

*“ . . . there was a high school student, they wouldn’t let her have the night off because she had pink eye. And then 12 of us had pink eye the next day . . . When you are in a kitchen, you’re touching everything. You’re touching the phones when they ring, everything. And then you think of how many patients got pink eye because of all the trays that went out because that kid, they wouldn’t let her stay home.”*

—Maine focus group participant

People in Maine are forced to choose between loved ones and paychecks—and sometimes jobs—when ill. Even a small loss of income may lead to trade-offs between housing, food, and medical care.

57% of the lowest-paid workers in the Northeast do not have paid sick days.

*“I have a 17 year old and if he’s sick, I have to live with it and I have to try to make the bills work at the end of the week.”*

—Widowed mother and Maine focus group participant

A requirement for paid sick days would have the following impacts:

- Paid sick days would enable more people to comply with public health advice for controlling seasonal influenza (“the flu”) and the large-scale spread of a new influenza strain (flu pandemic).
  - *Staying at home when infected could reduce by 15–34% the proportion of people impacted by pandemic influenza. Without preventative strategies, more than 11,000 people in the state could die in a serious pandemic flu outbreak.*
  - *One-quarter of respondents to a national survey report that they would have “serious financial problems” if they stayed home for 7 to 10 days during a flu pandemic. Such economic concerns are a major barrier to compliance with advice to stay home and are therefore a barrier to effective control of pandemic flu.*
  - *More than one-third of flu cases in the U.S. are transmitted in schools and workplaces.*
- With paid sick days, ill restaurant workers would be less likely to spread foodborne disease in restaurants.
  - *92% of restaurant workers in Maine do not have paid sick days.*
  - *The Maine Department of Health and Human Services reported 75 gastrointestinal disease outbreaks in the state in 2007. The vast majority of these involved or were suspected to involve norovirus, a stomach flu that can be passed through contact with food by infected food workers.*



- Paid sick days would reduce the likelihood of gastrointestinal disease (“stomach flu”) outbreaks in nursing homes.



- *Paid sick day policies were associated with significantly lower risk of respiratory and gastrointestinal disease outbreaks in nursing homes in a New York State study. Between 30 and 45 California nursing homes would be spared norovirus outbreaks each year under a paid sick days policy.*
- *In 2007, there were 38 stomach flu outbreaks in nursing homes in Maine.*

- In 2006, over 105,000 emergency room visits—17% of all emergency room visits—in Maine were entirely preventable. In addition, over 15,000 hospital admissions—1.5% of all hospitalizations—for chronic diseases such as asthma, hypertension, and diabetes in 2006 were entirely preventable. Paid sick days could allow workers and their dependents easier access to preventive and early care and help avoid unnecessary hospitalizations.

- *Among workers with health insurance, those without paid sick days are 15% more likely to use the emergency room and almost 40% more likely to delay necessary medical care relative to those with paid sick days. Maine’s ER usage was 30% higher than the national average in 2006.*
- *Parents who have paid time off are over 5 times more likely to care for their sick children.*
- *According to a recent survey, 42% of employed adults without paid sick days go to work when they are sick, compared with 28% of those with sick days.*

- Paid sick days would reduce income loss and the threat of job loss for low-income workers during periods of illness. This effect would be sizable enough to prevent hunger and housing insecurity.

- *About one in six workers in the U.S. report that they or a family member have been fired, suspended, punished or threatened by an employer due to needing time off for illness.*

More than half of all foodborne illness outbreaks reported in the U.S. occur in restaurants. According to the State of Maine Food Code (2001; Section 2-201.12), a food worker may be excluded from a food facility if he or she is diagnosed with a disease transmissible through food. Yet 92% of restaurant workers in Maine do not have paid sick days.

*“Working in a hospital, let alone in a hospital kitchen, you’d think they wouldn’t want us to come in. Oh, no. If you try to call out, they give you a hard time. You come in sick and the next day, three more people are sick.”*

—Maine focus group participant

Paid sick days allow people to get necessary medical care for themselves and their dependents. People who have paid sick days visit the emergency room less and delay necessary medical care less frequently.

Among workers with health insurance, those without paid sick days are 15% more likely to use the emergency room than those with paid sick days.

*“About a year ago I spent a week in the hospital. The people that I babysit for . . . it didn’t matter to them that I called in sick. ‘Well you know its only one kid and he’s easy to take care of.’ And I ended up taking him. I have a heart condition and I had not been feeling good for a whole week and finally my sons . . . took me to the emergency room.”*

—Maine focus group participant

# CONCLUSIONS

This assessment examines evidence regarding the potential health impacts of a paid sick days requirement. **Substantial evidence indicates that the law would have significant positive public health impacts for workers and for all people in Maine.**

An Act Ensuring Paid Sick Time—Summary of Health Outcomes and Impacts		
Health Outcome	Judgment of Magnitude of Impact <sup>1</sup>	Quality of Evidence
<b>Impacts on Community Transmission of Communicable Diseases</b>		
Influenza, pandemic or seasonal	▲▲▲	High
Foodborne disease in restaurants	▲▲	High
Gastrointestinal infections in health care facilities	▲▲	Medium
Communicable diseases in childcare facilities	▲	Low
<b>Economic Impacts on Workers</b>		
Loss of income	▲▲▲	High
Job loss	▲▲	Medium
<b>Impacts on Worker or Dependent Health</b>		
Taking time off for medical need	▲▲▲	High
Taking time off to care for ill dependents	▲▲▲	Medium
Appropriate and timely utilization of primary care	▲▲	Low
Avoidable emergency room visits	▲▲	Low
Avoidable hospitalization	▲	Low

1. This column provides a scale of significance ranging from 1–3, where 1=low impact and 3=a significant impact. An effect is considered significant if it would affect a large number of people in Maine and has the potential to create a serious adverse or potentially life-threatening health outcome.

## RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT METHODS

This assessment was based on the following information sources:

- Review of available peer-reviewed and empirical research.
- Analyses of statistics on the availability and utilization of paid sick days, data on communicable disease outbreaks and illnesses, and on the burden of illness in Maine.
- Analyses of data from the 2007 National Health Interview Survey.
- Focus groups and survey of workers.

### About Health Impact Assessment

The World Health Organization defines Health Impact Assessment as

“a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.”

Increasingly, countries are using Health Impact Assessment to prevent disease and illness, improve the health of their populations, and reduce avoidable and significant economic costs of health care services.

### For More Information



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This research was commissioned by the Maine Women’s Policy Center and funded by the Maine Health Access Foundation and Family Values @ Work: A Multi-state Consortium