

UNDERSTANDING PAID SICK LEAVE & PREVENTIVE CANCER SCREENING

A Fact Sheet for Public Health Professionals

Paid sick leave allows workers paid time off to attend to their own short-term medical needs (including preventive health care) or the short-term medical needs of a family member or other qualifying individual! The availability of paid sick leave has a significant positive impact on public health, slowing the spread of infectious disease as well as promoting routine cancer screenings. This fact sheet provides an overview of the paid sick leave policy landscape, explains why paid sick leave is important, outlines some of the important elements of a paid sick leave policy, and identifies some actions that public health professionals can take to encourage adoption of paid sick leave policies.

What's the policy landscape for paid sick leave right now?

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in March 2022, there were approximately 140 million civilian workers in the United States, of whom 79% had access to paid sick leave.² Consequently, 21% of the working population, or about 29.4 million people, did not have access to sick leave without losing pay and/or risking the loss of their job.³ Among private industry workers, 77% had paid sick leave benefits, compared with 92% of government employees.⁴

Workers earning low wages are less likely to have access to paid sick leave than workers earning higher wages.⁵ Specifically, only 57% of civilian workers with earnings in the bottom quartile of the wage distribution had access to paid sick leave, while 94% of workers in the highest quartile of wage distribution did.⁶ Access to paid sick leave was lowest among service workers, workers in production (including, for example, agricultural, construction, maintenance, and transportation workers), and part-time workers.⁷ Data from a 2010 report from the Joint



Economic Committee of Congress reviewed by the Pew Research Center found that just 27% of food preparation, food service, and child care workers had access to paid sick leave.⁸ Paid sick leave is also distributed inequitably among demographic groups: after controlling for various factors, Hispanic workers are significantly less likely to have paid sick leave than white non-Hispanic workers.⁹

While federal workers and contractors are entitled to paid sick leave,¹⁰ there is no federal mandate for private employers to provide paid sick leave to their employees. The United States is one of only three high-income countries in the world – along with Palau and the Republic of Korea – without any form of national paid leave.

As of July 2022, **35 jurisdictions** in the United States had enacted laws requiring employers to provide paid sick leave. These jurisdictions

include 14 states, the District of Columbia, 17 cities, and 3 counties.¹¹ For an up-to-date resource on paid sick leave mandates, consult [A Better Balance](#).

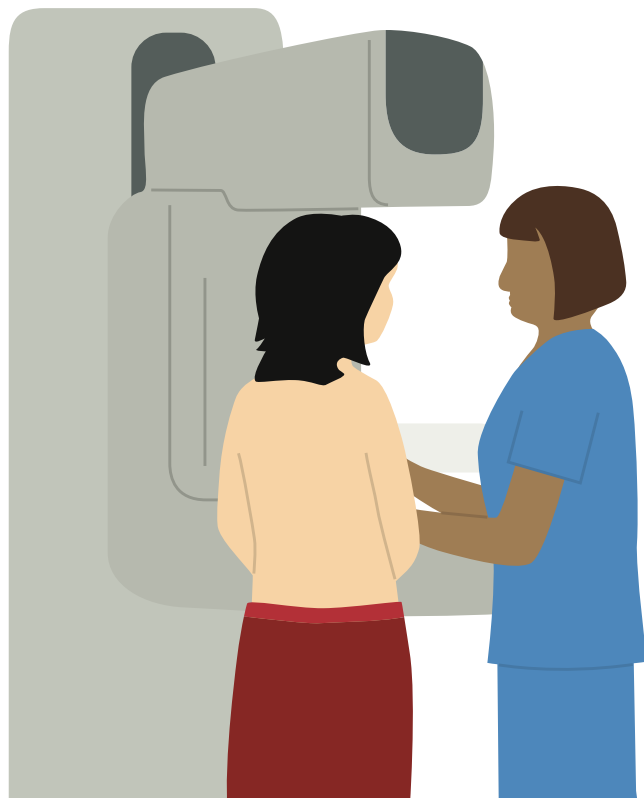
Several states have enacted laws related to paid sick leave that include preemption provisions, meaning that state laws dictate whether localities can enact their own paid sick leave laws and what those laws can include. Currently, 24 states have laws preempting local paid leave laws.¹² Five of those states have state-level paid leave laws that preempt local paid leave laws; the remaining 19 do not have state-level paid leave laws and also preempt local paid leave laws, thus creating a statewide policy vacuum.¹³ To learn more about preemption and its consequences for health equity, visit ChangeLab Solutions' [preemption resources](#).



Why is paid sick leave important?

Abundant research demonstrates the positive effect of paid sick leave on health outcomes generally.¹⁴ Paid sick leave is specifically linked to utilization of preventive cancer screenings as well. For example, one study examined preventive health care visits among workers with paid sick leave compared to those without paid sick leave. Workers with paid sick leave were significantly more likely to have undergone screening tests for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancer and to have seen a health care provider in the last 12 months than the workers without paid sick leave, and the difference was significant even after controlling for sociodemographic and health-care-related factors.¹⁵

Paid sick leave has a particularly positive effect on women's health. Another study concluded that employed women with paid sick leave were significantly more likely to have received a clinical breast exam or mammogram within the past



12 months, even controlling for socioeconomic factors, insurance, and health status.¹⁶ From these data, researchers calculated that “expanding sick leave to all female employees would result in up to 1.4 million [additional] breast exams annually in the U.S.”¹⁷ This demonstrates how access to paid sick leave is inequitable: female workers disproportionately lack paid leave benefits because they are more likely to be in low-wage and part-time jobs.¹⁸

What are the elements of a paid sick leave policy?

A paid sick leave policy, whether legislated or enacted as a private policy by an employer, needs to include these provisions:

- **Who** is eligible to earn paid sick leave, and who can it be used for? Paid sick leave can apply to full-time employees, part-time workers, and/or contractors. Paid sick leave policies can allow leave to be used to attend to the needs of the employee, their family members, or others for whom they provide care.
- **What** can paid sick leave can be used for? Many policies allow paid sick leave for mental and physical health, illness, and preventive services. Policies may also allow use due to closure of educational or caregiving facilities for children or because the employee or a family member has experienced domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.
- **When** and at what rate does paid sick leave accrue? Paid sick leave could accrue, for example, at the rate of one hour of sick leave per 40 hours of work, or could be front-loaded, so that each employee begins the year with a particular number of hours of paid sick leave. Paid sick leave can also accrue immediately, or after a short waiting period.

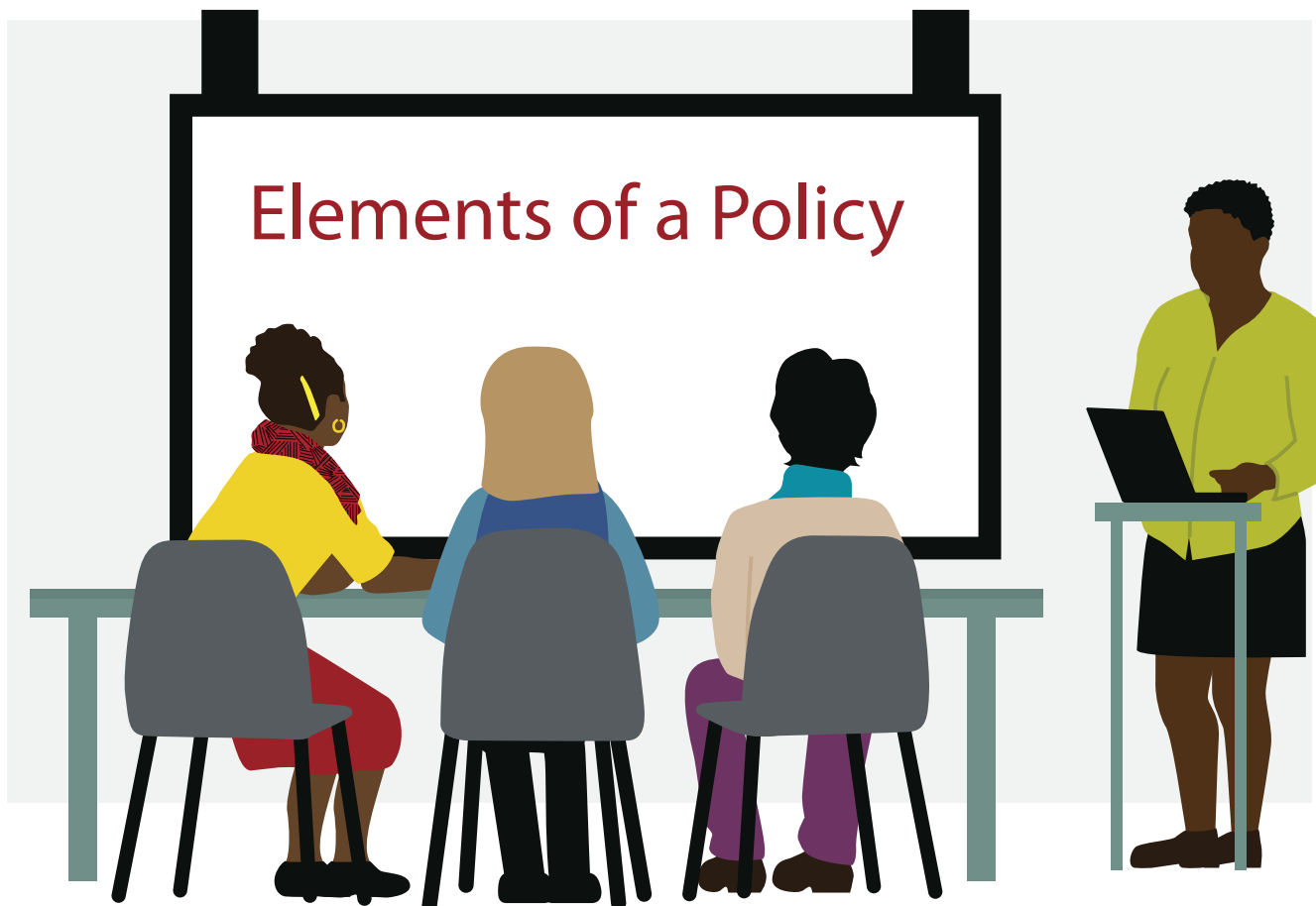
- **How** does an employee request and use paid sick leave, and under what circumstances is documentation required?
- **How** are employees protected from retaliation for using their paid sick leave?
- **How** much paid sick leave can accrue, and how much can roll over from one year to the next?

How can public health professionals promote paid sick leave?

Public health professionals can increase awareness of paid sick leave and its important role in improving health outcomes. As to cancer screenings, several cancer control professionals considered the availability of paid sick leave necessary to effectively promote cancer screenings among otherwise healthy adults.

As one cancer control professional explained, “In many, if not most, circumstances, the availability of paid sick leave is the make-or-break factor on whether or not someone is able to go and receive cancer screening.” This reality is particularly relevant for individuals for whom taking unpaid time off work to get screened is not a viable option. In order to promote paid sick leave, public health professionals can take a number of actions:

- **Find other stakeholders to work with on paid sick leave policy.** *State-level agencies* like departments of public health, health and human services, health care services, managed care, and labor; the civil service commission; and the office of equity and inclusion at the health department can collaborate on policies and help ensure that the work reaches communities of color, including tribal communities. *Elected officials* can be key partners, both in getting policies



enacted and acting as messengers or champions of paid sick leave. *Private-sector and community partners* like chambers of commerce, nonprofit organizations, school districts, insurers, health care providers and other community leaders or activists can promote paid leave for cancer screening.

- **Use many types of communications media**, including Spanish-language media. Consistently mention the use of paid sick leave for cancer screening. Include calls to action in written materials and social media. Create resources such as toolkits for employers; email campaigns explaining the benefits of paid sick leave use for screening to employers; events and sponsorships; public service announcements; or even mobile screening services brought directly to people's places of employment.

- **Incentivize employers to adopt a paid sick leave policy.** Employers could be offered free publicity, special recognition, or promotion as “employee-friendly” for adopting paid sick leave policies, or local licensing or permitting laws could be amended to allow streamlined processing for businesses that offer paid sick leave to employees.¹⁹ Research from the CDC’s National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program highlights programs in which employers have partnered with health programs to promote cancer screening among employees – for example, providing paid time off for the specific purpose of getting cancer screenings or providing on-site access to screenings.²⁰
- **Encourage discussion of paid sick leave in your state’s comprehensive cancer control plan**, especially if your state has a paid sick leave mandate that can be used for cancer screenings. For example, a plan could recommend educating employers and employees about the mandate and its applicability to cancer control screening. Even in states without a paid sick leave mandate, a plan could state that employers and worksites can provide financial coverage for recommended cancer screenings, including paid time off for employees to get screened, and/or provide incentives for employees to get cancer screenings, such as paid time off, monetary incentives, or incentives for workplace wellness programs.²¹



Paid Sick Leave & Preventive Cancer Screening Publications

This resource is one of many on paid sick leave and preventive cancer screening.

PAID SICK LEAVE: BENEFITS FOR WORKERS, EMPLOYERS, AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Paid sick leave (PSL) has many benefits:

- PSL enables workers to follow health recommendations that limit the spread of infectious disease in workplaces.
- Workers with PSL are significantly more likely to receive recommended preventive medical care, including cancer screenings, which can improve health and save lives.
- Jurisdictions that require employers to provide PSL have seen higher job growth than neighboring jurisdictions without PSL.
- Companies that have added PSL report higher employee satisfaction and lower staff turnover.
- 70% of Americans support the provision of PSL.
- The cost of providing PSL is substantially offset by cost savings from improved employee health outcomes.
- PSL could save the United States more than \$1.1 billion per year in preventable emergency room visits.

29.4 Million US Workers Lack Paid Sick Leave

PSL policies allow workers to attend to short-term health care needs — their own and those of their family members and other qualifying individuals.

Elements of a PSL Law or Policy

- Types of employers and/or employees covered
- Allowable uses of PSL
- How much PSL an employee gains over time
- How much PSL an employee can accumulate and/or save for future use

Presently, there is no federal requirement for PSL, but some states and local governments have PSL requirements, and some employers provide it voluntarily.

This publication was supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$180,000, with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government. ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. This legal information is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state. Published January 2023.

See this fact sheet's companion infographic, [Paid Sick Leave: Benefits for Workers, Employers, and Public Health.](#)

This publication was supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$180,000, with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.

ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.

Published January 2023.

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