



In Iowa's Interest:

Continuing the Progress for Working Families

by Senator Tom Harkin

On February 5th, our country marked the 20th anniversary of the *Family and Medical Leave Act* (FMLA) – a groundbreaking law that provides American workers with 12 weeks of protected — albeit unpaid — leave to recover from a serious illness or care for a new child or seriously ill family member. A recent update provides 26 weeks of family leave to families of injured service members and recent veterans.

The FMLA changed the landscape for hardworking Americans. While we celebrate this progress, we realize there is still work to be done when it comes to helping working families, and that includes guaranteeing paid sick time to individuals that work hard, earn it, and deserve it.

In the coming weeks, I will introduce the *Healthy Families Act*, a bill that would allow workers to earn up to 56 hours, or seven days, of paid sick time per year. Workers would earn one hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours worked. Employers that already provide paid sick time will not have to change their current policies, as long as their existing time can be used for the same purposes. Employers can also require workers to provide documentation supporting any request for leave longer than three consecutive days.

The United States is the only developed nation that does not guarantee paid sick days to its workers, and our economy and productivity suffer as a result. Contrary to popular belief, not absenteeism, but “presenteeism”— when a sick employee shows up to the workplace, infects other employees or customers, and is unproductive because they are not feeling well — is the greatest cause of lost productivity due to illness. One study found that a lack of paid sick days — and thus the inability to distance oneself from co-workers — contributed to an additional 5 million cases of the H1N1 flu during the 2009 outbreak.

Seventy percent of low-wage workers — those least likely to be able to afford a lost paycheck or lost job — have no paid sick days. This group is largely workers in jobs that have frequent contact with members of the public, including food service, hospitality, nursing home care, and child care. Their lack of paid sick leave poses a public health threat to all of us and our loved ones. Shockingly, nearly two-thirds of restaurant workers have reported cooking or serving food while sick. Workers' rights should matter to everyone, but they matter even more when you consider that your next turkey sandwich might be served with a side of the flu.

But perhaps most important, under the *Healthy Families Act*, workers would have the security of knowing that when illness strikes — as it undoubtedly will — they will be able to tend to their families and themselves without losing their jobs or their income. This bill will provide health, peace of mind and security for America's workers and their families — and that's something that everyone deserves.

For more information, please visit <http://www.harkin.senate.gov/> or follow Senator Harkin on Facebook and Twitter.