



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairwoman Alma Adams (NC-12)

Subcommittee on Workforce Protections Hearing

The Healthy Families Act (H.R. 1784): Examining a Plan to Provide Paid Sick Leave to U.S. Workers

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, March 11, 2020 | 10:15am

Today, we will discuss H.R. 1784, the *Healthy Families Act*, a proposal to establish paid sick leave as an essential workplace protection for our nation's workers. This hearing could not come at a more appropriate time. As we speak, the rapid spread of the coronavirus is highlighting the severe consequences of our failure to secure paid sick leave for millions of workers and their families.

Across the country, public health officials are rightfully asking or requiring potentially infected Americans to stay home from work and avoid travel. But for many workers – particularly low-wage workers – taking time off when they are sick means losing the wages they need to cover basic expenses, including food and housing. Many have no choice but to work even though they are ill.

We are deeply concerned about the potential impact of the coronavirus epidemic, and we are continuing to explore different options for providing workers access to paid sick leave on an emergency basis. Our nation's workers are particularly vulnerable to this emerging public health crisis because the United States is the only industrialized nation that does not require access to paid sick leave.

For the more than 32 million American workers who cannot earn paid sick days, getting sick – whether it's a rare, infectious disease or the common cold – often means having to choose between prioritizing their health and sacrificing their paycheck. Unfortunately, access to paid sick days is particularly limited for the low-income workers who need it most.

Of the bottom 10 percent of private-sector wage earners, just 3 in 10 have access to paid sick days. Making matters worse, inadequate access to paid sick leave is particularly concentrated in service-industry occupations that have frequent contact with the public. A 2016 survey found that 86 percent of women in the fast food industry lacked access to paid sick days.

For many workers, taking even a couple of unpaid days from work to recover from an illness could cost them a month's worth of utilities. As a result, workers often report to work even when they're ill, risking their health and the health of their coworkers. In 2009, researchers estimated that 20 million workers went to work sick.

When so many people are unable to forgo a paycheck and stay home when they are sick, an increased risk of infectious disease is inevitable. As a nation, we should have already learned this lesson. During the 2009 H1N1 flu epidemic, which killed more than ten thousand Americans, about one-third of infected workers went to work despite showing symptoms. This caused the disease to spread to as many as 7 million additional people.

Even without a global health crisis, paid sick days are critical for public health. A recent 2020 working paper found that, one year after enacting state laws allowing all workers to earn paid sick leave, those states saw an 11 percent reduction in influenza infections.

Paid sick days also mean more productive employees and more profitable businesses. Our economy currently loses an estimated \$234 billion each year due to reduced productivity from illness. Businesses are understandably hesitant to take on the additional expense of paid sick leave benefits. But, even accounting for the cost of paid sick leave, studies show that businesses still come out ahead because of higher productivity and lower turnover.

In Austin, Texas, for example, an analysis showed that a citywide paid sick days requirement would provide city businesses a net savings of more than \$4 billion annually. The evidence is clear: access to paid sick days is critical for the health of our families, our communities, and our economy. Accordingly, 12 states, including Washington, D.C. and twenty-two localities, have enacted laws that require employers to provide workers with paid sick days.

But it is ultimately up to Congress to establish a national floor for the right to earn paid sick days.

The *Healthy Families Act* will help achieve that goal through three key provisions:

- First, the bill guarantees employees in workplaces with 15 or more employees the right to earn one hour of paid sick or safe leave for every 30 hours worked up to 56 hours, or 7 days. In addition, the bill covers public sector employees without regard to size of the employing entity.
- Second, the bill permits employees to take leave for themselves or a family member for physical or mental illness, injury, preventative care, and for survivors of sexual assault, stalking, or domestic violence.
- Finally, the bill prohibits employers from firing or discriminating against employees for taking sick leave.

Today's discussion is long overdue. It is simply inexcusable that millions of workers in world's wealthiest nation have no way to earn the paid sick days they need to care for themselves and their families.

The Committee also recognizes that we need to provide workers immediate relief in response to the coronavirus epidemic. As we speak, the Committee is considering a range of options for a federal response that protects the health and economic security of workers and their families.

Before I yield to the Ranking Member, I would like to submit a statement into the record from a champion for paid sick days and the lead sponsor of the *Healthy Families Act*, Representative Rosa DeLauro.