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Family, business, health advocates cheer Department of Labor award to WA

WASHINGTON | Advocates for paid family and medical leave applauded the U.S. Department of Labor’s decision to award $247,000 to Washington state to study the economic impacts of implementing a paid family and medical leave program.

“The Washington Work and Family Coalition is excited by this news and what it could mean for the families of our state,” said Marilyn Watkins, policy director of the Economic Opportunity Institute. “I’ve gotten calls from pregnant women who don’t know how they’ll be able to afford more than a couple weeks off after giving birth, from people struggling to help an aging parent through a health crisis while going to work and tending to their own kids, from small business owners who would love to find a way to provide employees with 12 weeks of paid family leave – but just can’t do it on their own.”

For well over a decade, the Coalition – including a number of women’s, labor, senior, children’s, faith, small business, and health organizations – has advocated for paid family and medical leave.

“From a public health standpoint, the evidence for paid leave is overwhelming,” said Representative June Robinson, sponsor of House Bill 1273 to establish family and medical leave insurance (FMLI). “Babies are healthier for the long term when they are breast fed and their parents can stay home with them for the first several months. Adults are healthier and more productive when they have adequate leave to recover from their own serious health conditions or care for sick family members, without the stress of family financial crisis.”

House Bill 1273 and companion Senate Bill 5459 would provide workers with up to 12 weeks of partially paid leave to care for a new child or seriously ill family member, or for their own serious health condition. Benefits would be provided through a trust fund, financed through payroll premiums of about $65 per year for the state’s typical worker and their employer. In 2007, the Legislature passed a stripped down version of paid family leave that only provided 5 weeks for new parents and did not identify a funding source. Because of the recession, the program was postponed indefinitely rather than being implemented as intended in 2009.

Washington is one of eight states receiving Department of Labor grants.

“I think the research from this grant is just what we need to get family leave ‘unstuck’, and I applaud Governor Inslee’s leadership on this,” said Senator Karen Keiser, current sponsor of SB 5459 and prime sponsor of the 2007 bill. “Showing people just how much the state can save on public assistance, child care subsidies, and home care for seniors, along with how much more effective programs like home visiting can be will help some of legislators on both sides of the aisle understand the full benefits of family and medical leave insurance.”

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