

Improving Access to Washington's Paid Family & Medical Leave Program

Washington's Paid Family & Medical Leave program began providing benefits in 2020 to people needing time away from work to heal from their own serious health condition, care for a new child, or care for seriously ill family. Over the past two years, 250,000 workers and families have benefitted. To learn more or apply for benefits, see paidleave.wa.gov.

Washington's Work & Family Coalition helped craft and enact the PFML program. We continue to conduct outreach, identify barriers, and promote improvements to ensure that the program is equitably accessible to those who need it most, and that it supports healthy outcomes and economic security for our state's diverse workers, families, businesses, and communities.

SB 5649 will make PFML more compassionate and easier for workers, health care providers, and employers by:

- allowing people to apply up to 45 days in advance of an expected leave;
- extending family caregiving leaves up to 14 days after the death of the family member for whom the worker was providing care, or after the death of a newborn or stillborn child;
- allowing people to take medical leave during the first 6 weeks after giving birth without requiring additional medical certification.

Why we need these changes:

- People often know in advance they will need leave, for example when a new baby is expected or a surgery is scheduled. Yet now they must wait to apply for benefits until after the event, when they are likely to be most exhausted and overwhelmed. Advance applications will relieve stress, prevent mistakes, and allow workers to focus on the important job of healing or caregiving. It will also help employers better plan for the employee's absence and coordinate benefits.
- Currently, those who take leave to care for a seriously ill family member or new child experience an abrupt end to their benefit in the event of the loved one's death, allowing no time for grieving or dealing with the myriad details that follow a death. Allowing these leaves to continue for two weeks (subject to the current 12 to 18 week maximum leave) is compassionate and will support healthier workers, families, and businesses.
- New parents who give birth and care for their baby are entitled to take both medical leave to recover from childbirth and bonding leave, for a total of 16 to 18 weeks. But the current process is confusing and requires extra paperwork, so many new parents go back to work sooner than they want to or need to. We can and should make the process easier, for the health and well-being of both infants and parents.