

No one should have to choose

between job and family

USAction member stories in support of Paid Family & Medical Leave

When we asked USAction members if they had ever used family or sick leave to care for themselves or a family member, we were flooded with responses. People shared experiences about the generosity of employees who had provided paid leave, and of fellow workers who donated their sick days so that they could be with a loved one in a time of need. Members shared stories of being fired, or edged out of their jobs when they had made use of mandated benefits. We received numerous stories about the importance of the Family and Medical Leave Act, and comments from people about how the act must be improved to be relevant to the new workforce. This report shares some the most poignant of our members' stories from around the country. Together they make a powerful case for passage of the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act (S. 1810/H.R. 3712).



1. What works about family and sick leave today

- Employers with family-friendly policies
- Leave that is paid
- The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- Union benefits and services

& what this means for families.

- Quality time to bond with children
- Time off when we most need it
- Job protection & peace of mind
- Committed and productive employees

2. What doesn't work about the current system

- Employment practices from the "Mad Men" era
- FMLA doesn't cover many workers and situations
- Leave without a paycheck
- Penalties for using leave
- Lack of information about FMLA benefits

& what this means for families.

- Losing your home
- Losing basic financial security
- Getting fired
- Seeing retirement income slashed
- Delayed or not ever receiving care
- Returning to work too soon
- More stress when you least need it!

3. What's needed is what works.

1. What works:

Our families have changed dramatically over the past several decades. Today, just 30% of families with kids have stay-at-home moms and two out of every three women are the sole or equal breadwinner for their families. Families face a huge challenge managing both job and family needs, especially when faced with a family illness or accident. No one policy or program made all the difference for our members, but rather a combination of factors are critical including: employers with family friendly policies – especially when those include paid leave, the backstop of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to ensure job protection, and unions to win strong benefits and inform members about their right to protections like the FMLA.

Employers with family-friendly policies

I was fortunate. When my son got hit by a car in Florida several years ago and was in a coma and not expected to live, my boss and co-workers gave me the time I needed, with pay to go to Florida and stay with my son for 2 weeks until he came out of the coma and then whenever I needed to be off they let me take time off with pay. That's what I call a really caring company - **Carol R., (Kansas City, KS)**

I was able to take a full 12 weeks of leave from my job twice for the birth of both my children. Luckily I work for an employer that is often ranked as one of the top places for women to work. I wish all women were so lucky. - **Michelle K. (Trafford, PA)**

Leave that is paid

Both of my retinas detached at the same time. I needed bilateral out-of-town surgeries, recovery time and When I did return to work it was necessarily limited to half time for a while. Without paid leave I would have been knocked out of the game. - **Lyle C., (Yakima, WA),**

My husband was disabled and had multiple illnesses for the last 20 years of his life. I often needed to take off from work to care for him or take him to the hospital or a doctor's office. Fortunately, I had paid leave I

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could take. I don't know what I would have done all those years when I was the only employed person in the family, if I had not been paid for those times. It isn't fair that so many workers, including many women who are the sole breadwinner for their family, lose wages or can even be fired for taking care of a family member, or themselves. - **Heather W.P., (Greenbelt, MD)**

The Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

In 2009 my husband was in a home explosion that caused 3rd degree burns on his face and hands. We spent 6 weeks in a Seattle based hospital with numerous surgeries and approximately 2 months worth of recovery. If not for FMLA we would both be without our jobs which would have definitely hindered the healing process. We were and still are very thankful for that benefit. Having FMLA available when you need it the most definitely helps with peace of mind in the midst of chaos. **Jamie A., (Anchorage, AK)**

My husband and I have a son, Sam, with autism, and although I have had employers willing to work with me to help me juggle my schedule, my husband did not. We had 3 other children younger than Sam and are working 2 jobs to make ends meet. Insurance did not cover most of his medical or therapy costs. My husband brought in a factsheet on the FMLA to his boss explaining the law. It made all the difference. **Michelle F. (Detroit, MI)**

Union benefits & services

As an AFSCME union member I was on PAID medical leave for several weeks with my ailing brother who did not recover. I believe every worker should have earned sick leave benefits. - **Leamon H. (Smyrna, DE)**

While working for the USPS I missed some work due to illness and used FMLA to protect my job at the advice of my Union representative. FMLA probably saved my job for me. - **Susan R., (Davenport, IA)**

& what this means for families

Quality time to bond with children

Upon the adoption of my daughter, I took unpaid leave to be with her as she started her first-grade year. It was a rewarding experience, putting her on the bus and seeing her when she got home. - **David L. (Phoenixville, PA)**

When I gave birth to my only child, I was covered at work for maternity leave that was partially paid by my employer for 3 months. My husband also took an unpaid paternity leave from his job. This was a very important bonding time for my family and we are still glad that we made the decision to put our family first. Country's work best when families work best. I support the FAMILY ACT. - **Marian B. (Haddon Twp, NJ)**

Time off when we most need it

I helped my mother care for my father, who was dying of Alzheimer's disease, during the last 6 weeks of his life. I could not have done so without the Family Medical Leave Act, which held my job for me in my absence while I took unpaid time off. It meant so much to me and my family, AND my father. - **Carol N. (Houston, TX)**

When my 9 year old daughter went to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy I had to take a week off of work. When my 16 year old had to have surgery I also had to take another week off of work. I am fortunate to have a job that allows for paid time off. Without it, I would not have been able to take the time. - **Rebecca C. (New Haven, CT)**

Job protection & peace of mind

I used the Family Leave Act 13 years ago to care for my mother in the final stages of her terminal cancer battle. She worried during the 3 weeks that I was absent from my job that I would be fired though I assured her I wouldn't be. It was a priceless time for me to have with her. I was thankful for the legislation that allowed me to do this. - **Marilyn L. (Grandview, MO)**

“When my 9 year old daughter went to the hospital for an emergency appendectomy I had to take a week off of work. Without (paid leave) I would not have been able to take the time.”

“[Family Leave] is greatly important for the emotional well-being of both parent and child... The benefit for the employer is a much more productive employee.”

I had to take both paid and unpaid leave during my pregnancy with my son. I was ill during most of it and then developed preeclampsia that almost killed both of us. Having FMLA meant that my job was protected and I could help to support my family. - **Jennifer M. (Galt, CA)**

Committed and productive employees

Both my wife and I have taken family leave for the birth of our two daughters. It is greatly important for the emotional well-being of both parent and child to be able to take family leave. The benefit for the employer is a much more productive employee. - **Cory C. (Raleigh, NC)**

As a Human Resource administrator I have seen how this benefit is helpful for workers in America. I had a male employee whose spouse was pregnant and diagnosed with breast cancer at the same time, and they also had 2 children at home. He took all paid time available and unpaid time available thru FMLA to help his family at home. – **V.R. (West Orange, NJ)**

2. What doesn't work

Everyone gets sick, but not everyone has paid sick days and family leave. 40% of the workforce is not eligible for the Family and Medical Leave Act under the current law. Millions more cannot afford to take unpaid leave. Many people care for loved ones who are not included in the current definition of family under the FMLA. Outdated corporate policies and employer attitudes have failed to keep pace with the demands of the existing workforce. For millions of Americans, taking time off from work due to an illness or family emergency means sacrificing much needed income and risking losing a job.

Employment practices from the 'Mad Men' era

When my son wasn't quite a year old he was in the hospital with pneumonia. I stayed at the hospital all night and so didn't go to work. When I called my boss, she (who had no children) told me that someone else could sit with my son. My responsibility was to be at work. I took only one unpaid day off to be with my son. When I went back I was told that if it happened again I would be fired. - **Jill W. (Keene, NH)**

I had to quit a job with Walmart because though they spouted that they would give us hours we could count on, when my child was hurt and I needed to make appointments for his continued help, they changed my hours every week so I could never make those appointments. And they treated me horribly just because I asked. - **Janus W. (Salem, OR)**

I was fired once my pregnancy began to show. **Heidi S. (Princeton, MN)**

FMLA doesn't cover many workers & situations

I took an unpaid leave to care for my father who was sick and dying of pulmonary fibrosis. Unfortunately, the agency I work for took away FMLA when they found out that we don't employ enough workers to be covered under FMLA. The Family and Medical Leave needs to be changed and smaller employers should be included. Please pass the Family Act and update the FMLA to include smaller employers. **Starla N. (Springfield IL)**

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Leave without a paycheck

I took unpaid leave for one month after giving birth but had to return then because that is all we could afford. - **Cynthia C. (Boulder, CO)**

I had paid sick leave and vacation time during my employment, but when my mother became ill I used all my accumulated leave and was on unpaid leave several times during her last years of life. Because I was in a low-paid clerical position, this had a severe impact on my ability to stay abreast of bills and mortgage payments. - **Meryle K. (Portland, OR)**

Penalties for using leave

I have a chronic disease that has since completely disabled me. I was able to use the FMLA to preserve my job, but every day came out of my vacation time. Being home sick is not vacationing. When my vacation days ran out, I was allowed to take the time off unpaid, but I was transferred to a different job and my evaluations reflected that I was an "unreliable" employee, denying me any raises or bonuses earned by the company. FMLA needs to be applied without prejudice as well. - **Cynthia D. (Scotts, MI)**

I used up a lot of the vacation time I'd built up because I had to have a pacemaker. Not long thereafter, my mother got cancer. I needed to take off work to take her to chemotherapy and to help her. My supervisors refused to approve the leave and considered it "unscheduled leave." By doing so, I was subject to disciplinary measures when I missed work. [My employer] has a program where co-workers can donate some of their accumulated vacation time to workers who have exhausted their leave. I had co-workers who applied to donate hours to me so that my absences would not be unpaid; it would have helped immensely. Instead, the supervisors would not allow my co-workers to donate their hours to me, so all the time I missed was unpaid. So, during the very trying experience of my mother's fight with cancer, my supervisors created an additional hardship for my family; while I missed work to care for my mother I was not getting paid. The bills added up. Ultimately we had to file bankruptcy. - **Jess B. (Cape Girardeau, MO)**

Lack of information about FMLA benefits

I did not know about FMLA, thus resigned (from my job) to care for my daughter who was cutting herself due to school bullying. I (later found out that I) was supposed to be eligible when working for a New York State position. **S.K. (Salamanca, PA)**

My husband had kidney cancer last year and no one in my corporation including my manager reached out to me to advise me that I could have registered for FMLA at that time. So I juggled his care, running my household and my job all at the same time. It seems important to me that a more clear picture of this program is presented. I work for an enormous corporation and I feel that our HR and managers could be more informative. We are way behind other countries in the world when it comes to recognition that we need vacation time and family or personal care time to be productive employees. **Judy G. (Red Lion, PA)**

& what this means for families

Losing your home

I had to have surgery that I had to pay for out of pocket and then stay home for awhile afterwards. We lost our home and had 3 small children at home at the time. If only I could have been paid for those 3 weeks we would have kept our home and more than likely life would have been forever changed. - **Lauri B. (Sulpher Springs, CO)**

During my second pregnancy, I worked (waiting tables) until the day before I gave birth. Taking unpaid time off after having my daughter almost cost my family our home. President Obama's Making Home Affordable Program is the only reason we were able to keep making our mortgage payments. - **Molly P. (Parrish, FL)**

I had to leave my job to take care of my husband who was in a wheelchair with progressive Parkinson's since I couldn't make enough to pay for his care. I had two small children at the time to take care of as well. We ended up losing everything and were homeless. At the time (2001), the

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23% of American adults report that they have lost a job or have been threatened with losing a job for taking time off due to illness or to care for a sick child or relative

shelters were split into men and women (children went with the women). Since my husband was in a wheelchair, my family could not be split. It was only when a private shelter opened up that we had a place and we had to also pay 30% of my husband's Social Security. Thank God we had that. - **Tia P. (Wahiawa, HI)**

Losing basic financial security

My daughter and son-in-law took unpaid family leave 4 years ago to help care for his dying Mom. To this day, they have not been able to get caught up with their bills. They have made cuts as much as they can and still run short every month. This is so unfair. It's like they are punished for spending the last days, hours with a loved one. It should not be this way for anyone! - **Martha A. (Shelton, WA)**

I began taking unpaid leave to care for my ill spouse, seven years ago. The loss in income, as we were living hand-to-mouth, was devastating. It led to a long agonizing tumble downward in which we ultimately depleted our savings, lost our car, most of our possessions, and were left homeless. Seven years later we are still recovering from the effects. The worst part is that receiving even half my previous salary would have entirely prevented every bit of hardship we experienced. - **Miya B. (Philadelphia, PA)**

My wife is handicapped, in a wheelchair. I have to take my sick leave or vacation time to take her to doctors or spend time away from work to care for her. At that, I have it better than some in other industries. I just cannot afford to ever be ill or take a real vacation. – **William P., Weirton, WV**

Getting fired

I have one child with severe ADHD, and one child with chronic asthma. Many trips to the emergency room, and many trips to the school, psychiatrist, doctor, special therapists and I can't tell you how much time this single mother had to take off from work, sometimes just a day or two sometimes a week or two. I lost many jobs. - **Winifred B, (Shirley, NY)**

I was a teacher for over 28 years, and then my own illness and illness in my family, led to a situation that I never thought would happen. The school district I worked for brought in a person to cut many people and positions, so the budget would be met. This happened at a time that I had taken paid medical leave when my father was dying of cancer. Then again when my when my mother (who has since passed away) was ill and dying. Then I needed to use all my sick days, when I became ill. When I ran out of sick days, I used The Medical Leave Act for myself. The new administrative person decided to LUMP this time together, even though they were separate occasions, which led to this ENDING! I was told to retire or they would fire me, and I would lose all my retirement monies. - **Suzanne K. (Nashua, NH)**

As a nurse, I have seen countless family members lose work just to be with their loved one, especially at life's end without knowing if their job would be there for them. This should not be up for discussion. Family comes first. - **Arlene W. (Metairie, LA)**

Seeing retirement income slashed

I took unpaid family leave to care for my husband while he went through chemo and radiation for cancer of the larynx. We used up all our investments and savings for medical costs not covered by insurance. When all that money was gone we refinanced our home to get spending money which resulted in an upside down loan because of dropping property values. Now our income is about 1/3 of what it was before and we were never able to restore any of our emergency funds. Getting paid during the medical/family leave would have made a difference in the assets we used up. - **Patricia A. (Manchester, MO)**

My mom came to live with me and my family for 12 years, after she had a stroke. As she needed more care, I started cutting back on hours that I worked, changed jobs, ended up working only 6-8 hours a week. Not only did that make my family very short on money then, but now I will be getting less when I take my Social Security, because for at least 8 or 9 of those years, I was working less and earning less than I otherwise would have. - **Gayle S. (Rockville, MD)**

The typical woman 50 and older who leaves work to care for an ailing parent loses more than \$324,000 in lost earnings and retirement savings.

“I can't tell you how many times I went to work with a temperature above 101 because I had no paid sick leave.... American workplaces would be healthier if sick people could stay home because sick leave wouldn't affect their income.”

Delayed or not ever receiving care

As a contractor who is paid hourly for many years, all of my sick time and medical care has cost me billable days of pay on top of the doctor bills. It has cost me even more when I can't afford time off, and my health has worsened beyond what I could have cured more easily if I had sought care sooner. - **Jeffery B. (Hillside, IL)**

I needed to take paid leave which wasn't available. I couldn't afford my rent if I had taken unpaid. But as a result of not being able to take the leave I needed I am now blind in one eye. At least I kept a roof over my head, I guess. - **Kurt T. (Charlotte, MI)**

Returning to work too soon

I had an aneurysm/brain surgery, but was forced back to work after 90 days when FMLA ran out (or I would have lost the job). Nobody should be forced to go to work when they should be focusing on HEALING. - **Robin B. (St. Ann, MO)**

I can't tell you how many times I went to work with a temperature above 101 because I had no paid sick leave and couldn't afford to stay home and take a reduction in my already inadequate paycheck. I'm sure my coworkers didn't appreciate being exposed to my illnesses, either. American workplaces would be healthier if sick people could stay home because sick leave wouldn't affect their income. - **Judith B. (Ithaca, NY)**

I am currently on unpaid maternity/baby bonding leave (under the Family and Medical Leave Act), and although I am grateful that I am permitted this leave, it would be exceedingly helpful if the leave were paid (medical bills quickly add up during this time, even with decent medical insurance) and, too, if it were extended from 12 weeks to a minimum of 24 weeks. As a woman who is committed to providing the best care that I am able for my baby, I am doing my best to commit to breastfeeding, and being that all reputable medical organizations recommend that babies be exclusively breastfed for a minimum of 24 weeks (6 months), the leave that women are granted to care for our new babies should be at least this long, too. Allowing employed women adequate resources (time and

money) to care for our families will only strengthen the workforce, not only because employed women will be more committed to our work and better able to focus on it, (knowing that our families are taken care of) but also because our children, having received care from a less financially-stressed mom during the most crucial period of development, will likely be better employees in the future when they enter the workforce. - **Amanda S. (Sterling Heights, MI)**

More stress when you least need it!

I have taken unpaid leave for myself because of surgery. It was very hard living on my own to save money for the hospital bills monthly and next month's bills and also pay the ones that were due. All of this worry and then try to recover with no help and worry if your job was still going to be there when you return. All this pressure does not help a person recover. **Gale R. (Youngsville, NC)**

I have a chronic illness that sometimes makes it impossible to even get out of bed in the morning. My husband ends up taking all of his vacation days staying home taking care of the kids and me, and taking me to the numerous, never ending doctors visits. Paid family leave would help us so very much, as I have no friends/family nearby to assist. We are hopeful that this will pass, and take a huge weight off of the shoulders of working families everywhere. - **Torri L. (Durham, NC)**

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The FAMILY Act would create a national insurance program that would allow workers to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave per year for medical or family leave.

3. What's needed is what works.

The FAMILY Act

Paid sick days and family leave. Americans should not have to choose between their jobs and caring for themselves or their families. We need **The Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act** (S. 1810/H.R. 3712) which would:

- ✓ Create a national insurance program that would allow workers to take up to **12 weeks of paid leave per year** when they need to care for a new child; a sick family member; or their own serious medical condition, including pregnancy and childbirth.
- ✓ **Workers would receive two-thirds of their wages** (up to a cap), with protection from retaliation for requesting or taking the time.
- ✓ Workers in all companies, **no matter their size**, are covered. Younger, part-time, lower-wage and contingent workers would be eligible for benefits.
- ✓ Be funded by **small employee and employer payroll contributions** of two-tenths of one percent each (two cents per \$10 in wages), or about \$1.50 per week for a typical worker.
- ✓ Be administered through a **new Office of Paid Family and Medical Leave** within the Social Security Administration. Payroll contributions would cover both insurance benefits and administrative costs.

The FAMILY Act is sponsored by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D – Conn.) and Sen. Kristen Gillibrand (D – N.Y.)

The guarantee of paid leave access would have significant and widespread benefits for American workers, businesses and the economy.

We need a fund for family leave, so that we can afford to take care of our children and our parents when they need us there the most.

Working families are the engines of our economy. When we do better, we all do better.

Fair wages & family supports

Working families and the middle-class are getting crushed. Powerful corporations are cutting wages and benefits so people can't even meet the basics. Wages are so low that millions of full-time workers are below the poverty line. These economy-busting jobs are stalling our economy and hurting our communities. It's up to us, through our government, to maintain a wage and benefit floor, so people can meet the basics.

Raise the minimum wage. Two out of three Americans who work at the minimum wage are women, and that includes millions of working moms and single moms. Raising the minimum wage will help women and families meet the basics to care for and support their families. Working families and the middle-class are the engines of our economy. Increasing the minimum wage raises wages for millions of Americans, boosting the economy and building stronger communities.

Equal pay for equal work. Women should get paid the same amount as men for doing the same work.

Time for our jobs and our kids. Lift the huge challenge of managing both job and family life, with affordable childcare, quality pre-K and after-school programs.

Family and community involvement!

It's up to us to work together to build an America that works for all of us – not just wealthy CEOs. Get involved now to demand that women and families have a fair shot to get ahead. Take one of these steps:

- **Ask your elected officials to co-sponsor the FAMILY Act**
- **Share your story**
- **Join a state organization working for the FAMILY Act**
- **For more information**
 - www.USAction.org
 - www.nationalpartnership.org/issues/work-family/
 - www.FAMILY ActNow.org

Our message to Congress –

Stand up for an America that Works for All of Us – not just huge corporations and the ultra-rich!

USAction builds power by uniting people locally and nationally, on-the-ground and online, to win a more just and progressive America.

USAction organizes for power, for democracy and for change.

Acknowledgements:

USAction Members

For sharing their stories that show so powerfully the need for change and the actions they take to make change each day.

Additional grassroots member stories are available from USAction. For more information contact cwardwik@usaction.org

Partners

National Partnership for Women and Families - www.nationalpartnership.org

FAMILY Act Coalition - [www.FAMILY ActNow.org](http://www.FAMILYActNow.org)

USAction State Affiliates - <http://usaction.org/affiliates/>

Research

American Women for the report *Economic Security for Women & Families – A Conversation Guide*, from which the facts referenced in this report were drawn. Report available here: <http://www.americanwomen.org/join-the-conversation>.

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