

Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
Committee on Finance
Paid Leave Working Group
June 18, 2020, 11 am

Good afternoon. Thank you, Senator Cassidy and Senator Hassan, for inviting me to speak to you today and for dedicating your time to this crucial issue.

Eight in 10 workers in this country have no paid family leave. Six in 10 have no medical leave. They are forced to make impossible choices between their families and their jobs that leave them, and our economy, in jeopardy.

The FAMILY Act would change that. It would create a comprehensive, national program that provides 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave, during which workers could earn 66% of their wages – all for less than the cost of a cup of coffee per worker per week.

The legislation is based on successful programs in states like California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and my home state, New York. Employers and employees in those states, and others using this model, have already benefitted– especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A [study](#) from the Urban Institute found that California and Rhode Island’s paid leave programs made it possible for workers to access benefits while a federal response was still being debated. And, because those programs were already funded, employers didn’t have to front the costs while waiting for federal reimbursements.

If we’d had a national paid family and medical leave program in place, we could have quickly adjusted the funding and terms of that program to respond to this crisis and contained the virus’ spread by enabling sick people to stay home. Now, as states and businesses reopen, the risks of COVID remain. Until we have a vaccine, ensuring sick people can afford to stay home is still the best way to slow the spread of COVID and reduce demand on our health care system.

Our COVID relief package made some progress in extending paid leave, but [loopholes left 75% of workers out](#). We must do better. The House-passed HEROES Act would close these loopholes, and also provide a measure of security as parents struggle with children home from school and daycare.

This crisis has also shown us why only offering paid leave benefits to new parents is not nearly enough. Even before COVID, 75% of people using unpaid FMLA did so for non-new baby related reasons.

Universal paid leave would also level the playing field for large and small businesses competing for the same employees. [In 2018](#), one in four workers at large companies were offered paid family leave. At small businesses it was only one in ten.

We must extend emergency leave through 2021 and expand it to cover all workers and all FMLA reasons. And we must simultaneously develop a permanent national paid leave program.

COVID has put a magnifying glass on what working families in big states and small states, conservative communities and liberal ones, have known all along: forcing people to choose between their families and a paycheck is wrong for our families, wrong for our economy, and wrong for our country.