

Family-Support During COVID-19

Helping Families Be Home Base

Rachel Anderson

Director, Families Valued & Resident Fellow
Center for Public Justice

Chelsea Maxwell

Program Associate, Families Valued
Center for Public Justice

May 19, 2020

Abstract

As communities within the United States move from a shelter-in-place posture to one of “pandemic resilience,” families play a unique and fundamental role. In addition to providing and caring for children and other vulnerable members, families are serving as a ‘home base’ – places of refuge as other communal institutions alternately reopen and close.

Public policy should be designed to provide moral and practical support to families, enabling family resilience as a part of social resilience. Policymakers should ensure that caregiving time is protected through paid sick and family leave programs. This leave must be flexible and significant enough to accommodate care for family members and, sadly, bereavement for those lost during COVID-19. As was the case before the pandemic, paid parental leave should be made available to those expecting or caring for a new child.

Family-Supportive Policy Recommendations

1. Extend emergency paid family and sick days to enable all employees to flexibly exit work for caregiving when schools or other communal care sites close
2. Allow the use paid family and sick days for additional family care needs including care for family members with COVID-19, care for disabled and vulnerable family members, and for bereavement
3. Establish a permanent paid parental leave program

Families in a Pandemic Resilient Society

As the costs of mass social distancing multiply, many communities are lifting shelter-in-place orders and adopting a posture of “pandemic resilience.”¹ As one set of scholars noted, during this period of pandemic resilience, a society must “control a highly infectious disease while preserving essential public institutions, mobilizing the economy to provide surge capacity to fight the disease and keeping the rest of the economy maximally open.”²

As states and communities lift broad shelter-in-place orders, the locus of vigilance and response to COVID-19 will shift to smaller entities. Workplaces, schools, and community-based institutions will need to participate in disease surveillance in order to catch cases early and prevent further spread. If COVID-19 is detected, institutions must respond, excluding known carriers from access to communal spaces and work with public health officials to conduct contact tracing to identify other carriers. A roadmap for re-opening drawn by scholars at the American Enterprise Institute explains:

[E]very confirmed case should be isolated either at home, in a hospital, or (voluntarily) in a local isolation facility for at least seven days, or according to the latest CDC guidance. People awaiting tests should be advised to quarantine until their results are returned. The close contacts of confirmed cases should be traced and placed under a home or central quarantine, with active daily monitoring for at least 14 days, or according to the latest CDC guidance.³

Guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends school closure of two to five days following an identified COVID-19 case among the student or staff.⁴ In other words, even as care sites and schools re-open, families must be ready for these centers to close periodically. Likewise, as families with loved ones in nursing facilities, long-term care, or retirement and assisted living communities monitor the conditions of care, they must be prepared for transition. If a residential community experiences an outbreak or a family deems a center unsafe, then loved ones may need to move out and to a family home.

Finally, as COVID-19 continues to end lives, families will also need time to mourn, often in keeping with religious teaching and tradition. An essential function of family is to draw members together to honor the sanctity of life at its vulnerable and final stages.

Employer Responsibilities

Although the focus of this brief rests with family responsibilities and their related policies, family experiences are deeply entwined with employer choices and challenges.

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ), through its Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance and Sacred Sector initiatives, has prioritized advocacy for and technical assistance to congregations and faith-based organizations in relation to COVID-19 response policy.

Elsewhere, CPJ's Families Valued initiative has made recommendations regarding employers' role relative to employee caregiving.⁵ Employers should bear responsibility for that which they have proximate control: job protection and non-discrimination against workers with family responsibilities, organizing the workspace and the timing of work in ways that respect workers' family obligations, and providing clear guidance about the appropriate use of paid time off for family care.⁶ The cost of benefits that support major events that occur infrequently during one's lifetime may be better covered through a mix of employer, employee, and communal contributions. Thus, paid family leave, for example, would be well covered through a public system.

Employers face a host of new and complex responsibilities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anyone who runs a business or nonprofit enterprise that involves human contact must take into account just how easily COVID-19 spreads and the risks it poses. For faith-based organizations of all sizes, and for smaller organizations in particular, the responsibilities associated with work in the COVID-19 era are ridden with cost and uncertainty. Even the most intentional and well-prepared organizations may face questions about whether and how to proceed.

From the standpoint of employer responsibilities and economic vitality, it is crucial that any public policies enacted to promote pandemic resilience equip employers in taking on their pandemic-related responsibilities. As a baseline step, governmental bodies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) uphold public justice by connecting evidence and judgment to articulate standards for health and safety.

Centering Family Well-Being

Family life and work are two God-given spheres of human responsibility. God's design for human flourishing includes a respect for the **dignity of work** and **healthy families**. These two principles have motivated and grounded the case for family-supportive policies and practices, including paid family leave, as have several core principles⁷ which deserve reflection in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

Honoring caregiving

Family caregiving for children, elders, those affected by COVID-19 and other forms of illness is a worthy and crucial calling. For some, caregiving will need to be their core work, even if that work is not rewarded in the marketplace. Families and public policy must ensure that those who respond to the call to care are not thereby placed in extreme financial hardship.

Practical support

As communities transition to a posture of pandemic resilience, the support provided to families and workers must be more than verbal or ceremonial.⁸ The support offered to families must be proportional to the challenges families are facing. Many of the practical arrangements that once wove families, workplaces, and communities together have been disrupted by COVID-19. As old arrangements crumble, practical support for families must provide flexibility and financial stability.

Address system challenges

Although COVID-19 can infect and wreak havoc on any human body, some members of society may face heightened exposure and health effects from the virus. Workers interacting closely with others may carry a greater risk for infection in comparison to workers who are able to telework.⁹ People of color are disproportionately represented in service occupations such health care support, protective services, postal services, and food processing, transportation and preparation.¹⁰ A portion of these service jobs also lack benefits, such as paid sick days, that could enable workers to take time off if they become contagious or care for children and other loved ones.¹¹ Policies to sustain families during COVID-19 must take into account systemic inequities, such as limited access to workplace benefits, that predated the virus.

Support economic vitality

Economic activity is vital to our collective well-being. It enables families to fulfill their provider role, a role that has both material benefits for the family and an impact on family habits and identity. The negative consequences of unemployment for children, family, and community are well-documented.^{12,13} Thus, policies supporting families during COVID-19 should mitigate economic hardship from loss of work while also, whenever possible, helping workers retain connection to their line or place of work.

Financial stewardship

Policymakers are rightly allocating significant resources to a nation and economy affected by COVID-19. Policy should continue to be guided by financial stewardship which requires interventions to be scaled to their purpose and commitment to raise revenue in the post-pandemic period.

A Case for Emergency Sick Days, Family Care, and Parental Leave

Prior to COVID-19, the Center for Public Justice's Families Valued initiative called for employers to expand family-supportive practices and for public policies such as paid family leave.^{14,15} Now, workplace and public policies should be adapted to families' pandemic roles and realities.

1. Provide emergency paid family care days, in addition to emergency paid sick days, to enable employees to flexibly exit and return to work due to illness and caregiving needs

Policy and health experts contend that paid sick days are crucial to slowing the spread of COVID-19.¹⁶ Comparing U.S. states to those without paid sick days mandates, researchers identified a correlation between sick pay coverage and lower influenza activity. Paid sick days, they concluded, decrease employees' "contagious presenteeism."¹⁷ CDC guidance urges individuals to stay home from work if they are showing several of a wide range of COVID-19 symptoms in order to avoid the spread of disease in the workplace.¹⁸ Paid sick days enabling workers, particularly those in low-wage jobs or with limited savings, to comply with public health guidance are more crucial now than ever.

Similarly, public health is well served by family care days. If one's own child, disabled or elderly family member is sick or expressing symptoms, he or she may need family care in order to remain home from their school or place of care and avoid infecting other people. If a school or place of care closes temporarily because the disease is detected, that process is facilitated by parents who can stay home. Sixty-six percent of all children ages one to six are growing up in a family where all parents are employed; an even larger percentage of parents of older children work outside of the home.¹⁹ Each of these parents will face disruption and a host of difficult choices as this year progresses and until a COVID-19 vaccine or cure emerges.

Typically, paid sick leave is an employer-paid workplace benefit. Workers often use this benefit to cover both personal sick days and time for family care. When a child is home sick from school or one's aging parent needs to visit the doctor, a worker may draw on a reserve of employer-paid sick days to cover that time. There are many reasons why paid sick days (for personal sick use and family care) should remain a workplace-based,

employer-provided benefit. Employers can set accrual rates and the increments in which leave is taken - a full day, half day, or a few hours at a time - in a manner appropriate to the workplace. Managers can monitor and approve paid sick days for medical and family care without requiring extensive certification. In a well-functioning workplace, a clear benefits policy and effective communication between managers and employees contributes to productivity and morale.

But, not all workers have access to paid sick days. Employers in low-wage sectors have been slow to provide paid sick days. Although the majority of the U.S. workforce has access to some form of paid time off from work, just over 15 percent of the workforce has no source of paid time off. Among these are some of the lowest wage members of the workforce who can least afford to take away from work without pay.²⁰ Some small employers feel they cannot afford the benefit. Self-employed and some gig-economy entrepreneurs are also without paid sick days; some earn too little to feel economically capable of taking time off. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic recession is placing stress on employers and families alike. Families have *more* need for paid sick and family care days; many employers are even more worried about revenues and expenses.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), enacted on March 18, 2020, established vital support for families and workers within existing benefits frameworks. The law requires emergency paid sick and family leave benefits for COVID-related absences from work. The benefits are administered by employers, but employer costs are fully offset by a refundable employer payroll tax credit. The credit covers the employees' wages while on leave, up to a cap, and health insurance premiums.²¹

Elsewhere, CPJ has detailed the provisions of the FFCRA,²² including what the law means for sacred sector employers - those nonprofits and other organizations whose work is rooted in a faith-based history or mission. As with many newly-created COVID-response programs, the FFCRA involved implementation hurdles. Employers and payroll companies have needed to adopt new protocols. Workers and managers have needed to negotiate the terms of leave, particularly when applied to establish reduced work schedules or intermittent leave.

The benefits of the FFCRA approach outweigh its challenges. The law enables workers time to seek treatment and recover from COVID. In the spring of 2020, shelter-in-place orders meant tens of thousands of school and child care facilities closed. FFCRA provided a means for workers and employers to retain their employment relationship rather than employers layoff workers with family obligations or workers quit because of caregiving demands. Whereas states and municipalities have typically broadened access to paid sick days through an unfunded employer mandate, the FFCRA provided federal funding to absorb the cost.²³ Designed as a *payroll* tax credit (rather than income tax credit), the policy includes nonprofit and for-profit workplaces alike.

The FFCRA model of an employer-administered, publicly-financed paid time off system also addresses inequities across the U.S. workforce. It provides benefits for those low-wage sectors of the economy less likely to offer paid time off. Self-employed workers can also file for a refundable payroll tax credit if they encounter the same care needs, essentially extending paid sick and family care days to a new segment of the workforce. For those self-employed and gig-economy workers who are not high earners, the FFCRA introduces a valuable new benefit.

The emergency paid sick and family leave provisions of the FFCRA provide a foundation for supporting families during the period of reopening and closing that lies ahead during the next phase of living with COVID-19. Employees will continue to need both personal and family care. Paid family care days enable parents or relatives who otherwise need to work to care for children when school is closed. Likewise, paid family care days could assist families who need to take in other vulnerable family members such as a parent whose nursing or independent living facility experiences an outbreak or is suspected to be unsafe. Family care days and paid sick days should be offered in tandem with, rather than as substitutes for, each other. In addition to adequate time for one's own self-quarantine, diagnosis, treatment and recovery, employees should have access to paid family care days for the following needs:

- Care for a family member who is recovering from COVID-19
- Care for a child whose school or place of care is closed due to COVID-19
- Care for a disabled or elder family member whose place of care is closed due to COVID-19
- Care for a child or a disabled or elder family member who is at risk of COVID-19 infection in their current place of care

Although the family is intended to be a refuge, the circumstances of COVID-19 also raise the risk of abuse within the home. Paid time off under the FFCRA should also be available for those seeking assistance in a situation of domestic violence in their home.

The original FFCRA excluded those working for employers with 500 employees or more. These workers will also need both sick and family care days in order to observe public health guidance. The cap on employer size should be eliminated. Extending the family care leave provisions of the FFCRA will help families flexibly exit and return to the workplace in order to attend to family care responsibilities during COVID-19. FFCRA can, essentially, function as a “family care bank” for workers as schools and care sites go through periods of opening and closure throughout 2020. Policymakers should replenish and extend family care leave for the period of pandemic resilience.

2. Enable paid family care days for grieving and bereavement

The presence of COVID-19 in our society brings with it the sobering presence of death in our midst. To date, over 90,000 Americans have died of COVID-19.²⁴ Many more people will

perish in the coming year, even as we implement protective measures. An important responsibility of families and religious communities in this moment is to attend to grief and loss, honor those who have died, and recall the promises of our faith traditions.

The experience of grief is both individual and communal. Yet faith and community leaders and families are struggling to find different ways to respect the deceased and grieve well, while still observing social distancing guidelines. Some funeral homes and faith leaders are currently helping families set up remote options for holding memorials. For the few family members that can be present for a memorial service, mourners are required to sit in separate pews and maintain physical distance from each other.

These observances, even in modified form, affect our mental health and common life. Participating in mourning rituals helps bind people and families together amidst loss and hardship. End-of-life rituals are a way of telling one's family story, carrying a thread from one generation to the next, and honoring the sacredness of each life. Whether it is sitting shiva in a loved one's home with extended family and friends paying respects, or worshipping together in honor of one's life and future resurrection, traditions regarding mourning and loss often involve social connection.²⁵

Although policy cannot and should not dictate how grieving occurs, it can ensure all have the ability to mourn and honor those at the end of life. As noted above, paid family care days should be available for workers whose loved ones are facing death or have recently died. Families should have the time and ability to honor their loved ones, consistent with their conscience and religious tradition.

3. Establish a child-centered paid parental leave program

For those who are pregnant or caring for a newborn, the pandemic brings unique concerns. Medical researchers do not yet know if pregnant women or children in utero face any higher risk of COVID-19 infection. The CDC does advise caution for pregnant women, noting that pregnancy-related conditions may increase risk of infection. The CDC also notes that "pregnant people also have higher risk of severe illness when infected with viruses from the same family as COVID-19 and other respiratory infections."²⁶ Although children have shown particular resistance to acute COVID-complications, the long-term impacts of exposure remain unknown. Historical studies have connected low health and socioeconomic outcomes in certain adults to exposure to flu virus during the 1918 influenza epidemic.²⁷

The mobilization of health systems for COVID-19-treatment could reduce access to prenatal care, particularly for those experiencing complicated pregnancies. And women experiencing complicated pregnancies may avoid seeking medical treatment for fear of contracting COVID-19 in the hospital.

Finally, the impact of stress prior to and just after birth has a known impact on child health. During a period of a public health crisis, this stress and its negative consequences for child development could rise.

Altogether, the medical data and circumstances point to the need for protection and prevention from COVID for pregnant women during the COVID-19 crisis. Employers should offer accommodation to women who are pregnant, including telework and other protected work conditions that minimize exposure to the virus. Women in jobs requiring physical work and extensive contact with others should be afforded ample rest and periods of self-quarantine in order to avoid infection as well as pregnancy complications that could require hospital visits.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, public and bipartisan legislative interest in paid family leave was on the rise. During the COVID-19 crisis, paid parental leave plays a unique and valuable role. It can and should be available during the prenatal period so that mothers can secure adequate rest, protect themselves from risky work conditions, and attend quickly to medical symptoms (COVID-19 or otherwise) as a preventative precaution.

Families in a Pandemic Resilient Society

A public justice perspective counsels policy that attends not just to the individuals within a society, but to the diverse institutions through which individuals live and flourish.

A society living with COVID-19 is one in which institutions must be both vigilant and nimble. It will require the ability to close and reopen communal settings such as workplaces, houses of worship, schools, and residential sites in order to stall the person-to-person spread of the virus. Families, ultimately, will play several crucial roles as a place of last refuge when other social institutions temporarily close, as economic provider, and as giver of care and attention during periods of new life, vulnerability, illness and grief. As such, our public policies should dedicate solid attention to families—alongside the many other organizations seeking relief and support—so that they can continue in their crucial, foundational roles.

Endnotes

1. Danielle Allen, et al., *Roadmap to Pandemic Resilience*. (Cambridge, MA: Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, Harvard University, 2020), <https://ethics.harvard.edu/Covid-Roadmap>.
2. Allen, *Roadmap*, 11.
3. Gottlieb, *Road Map*, 2020.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Interim Guidance for Administrators of US K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. March 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-schools.html>.
5. Amy Zietlow, *Called to Care: Honoring Elders and the Family Care Journey* (Washington, DC: Center for Public Justice, 2019), <https://www.familiesvalued.org/calledtocare>.
6. Rachel Anderson, *Family-Supportive Workplaces: Resources for Sacred Sector Employers* (Washington, DC: Center for Public Justice, 2019), <https://www.familiesvalued.org/family-supportive-workplaces>.
7. "Principles for Family-Supportive Policies," Families Valued, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.familiesvalued.org/resources/principles>.
8. Karleigh Frisbie Brogan, "Calling Me a Hero Only Makes You Feel Better," *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/i-work-grocery-store-dont-call-me-hero/610147/>.
9. "COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.
10. "Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified January 22, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>.
11. Marc Kagan, "'Essential' Workers Are Dying," *Slate*, April 2, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/essential-workers-deaths-underclass.html>.
12. Milena Nikolova and Boris Nikolaev, "How Having Unemployed Parents Affects Children's Future Well-Being" *Up Front* (blog), The Brookings Institute, July 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/07/13/how-having-unemployed-parents-affects-childrens-future-well-being/>.
13. Jennie E. Brand, "The Far-Reaching Impact of Job Loss and Unemployment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (August 2015): 359-375. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043237>.
14. "The Case for Paid Family Leave," Families Valued, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.familiesvalued.org/case-for-paid-family-leave>.
15. "Five Dimensions of a Family-Supportive Workplace," Families Valued, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.familiesvalued.org/five-dimension-webinar>.
16. Johanna Catherine Maclean, Stefan Pichler, and Nicolas R. Ziebarth, "Mandated Sick Pay: Coverage, Utilization, and Welfare Effects," *NBER Working Paper*, no. 26832 (March 2020), <http://doi.org/10.3386/w26832>.
17. Stefan Pichler and Nicolas Ziebarth, "The Pros and Cons of Sick Pay Schemes: Testing for Contagious Presenteeism and Noncontagious," Working Paper No. 22530, National Bureau of Economic Research, (August 2016), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22530.pdf>.
18. "Symptoms of Coronavirus," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last updated March 20, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>.

19. "Young Kids and Parental Employment," Kids Count Data Center, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, January, 24, 2019, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/updates/show/230-young-kids-and-parental-employment>.
20. "Access to Paid Personal Leave," Employee Benefits Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified March 30, 2018, https://www.bls.gov/ebs/paid_personal_leave_122017.htm.
21. Families First Coronavirus Response Act, 29 U.S.C. § 5101 (2020).
22. Center for Public Justice, "What New COVID-19 Legislation Means for Faith-Based Employers," April 3, 2020, <https://www.familiesvalued.org/what-new-covid-19-laws-mean-for-faith-based-employers>.
23. Notably, whereas paid sick leave mandates have a cost impact on firms, they have not been found to have a significant impact on overall employment levels. Stefan Pichler and Nicolas Ziebarth, "Labor Market Effects of U.S. Sick Pay Mandates," W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research Working Paper 18-293, (September 2018), <https://doi.org/10.17848/wp18-293>.
24. "Cases in the U.S.," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last updated May 19 <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>
25. Kirsten Weir, "Grief and COVID-19: Saying Goodbye in the Age of Physical Distancing," (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2020), <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/grief-distance>.
26. "Pregnancy, Breastfeeding, and Caring for Young Children," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed May 4, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>.
27. Jonas Helgertz and Tommy Bengtsson, "The Long-Lasting Influenza: The Impact of Fetal Stress During the 1918 Influenza Pandemic on Socioeconomic Attainment and Health in Sweden, 1968–2012," *Demography* 56, (July 2019): 1389–1425, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-019-00799-x/> .