

Testimony in support of Portland's proposed Earned Paid Sick Days ordinance
Delivered to Portland City Council's Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committee
Eliza Townsend
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Good evening, Councilors Raye, Ali and Batson, I am Eliza Townsend. I live on Wolcott St, I am the executive director of the Maine Women's Lobby, and I am very pleased to speak in support of the proposed ordinance.

The ability to earn paid sick time and to apply that time in instances of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking is an issue of the highest priority. The low wage occupations where workers are least likely to be able to take time off with pay when they are ill are those most commonly held by women and people of color.

No one should have to choose between the time they need to get well or the paycheck they need to make ends meet. When low-wage workers, people who are barely getting by as it is, have to make that choice, it's no wonder they choose to go to work sick. Sadly, the lack of paid time off is most common in fields that bring those sick workers in to contact with the public and with vulnerable populations--retail, restaurant and hospitality, child care, and elder care.

It's no wonder that illness spreads. Let's remember that 79 Maine people died from the flu during the 2017-2018 season, and that the outbreak swamped Maine Med and Mercy Hospital.

The solution is simple, one that has already been adopted in 10 states, over 30 municipalities and the District of Columbia: the ability for workers to earn paid sick time.

The ordinance before you is reasonable, as it allows workers to earn paid sick time at a rate of 1 hour for every 30 worked, capped at 48 hours or 6 days per year.

It is socially just, because it applies to all workers, and allows them to use it to care for chosen family or to attend court, receive services or seek treatment as a result of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking. This is essential because part-time and seasonal workers are less likely than others to have access to paid time off; because a large segment of our population is employed by small businesses; because women, immigrants and people of color are disproportionately represented in the fields that lack paid sick time; because the shape of families has changed in 2018; and because deploring violence is not enough.

It is needed, because real people are without sick time now, and that impacts all of us. I'd like to illustrate that assertion.

- Last week I spoke with a woman who works at Whole Foods. She told me workers there are given two "points" for taking a sick day, that 9 points merit a stern talking-to, that any further time is likely to result in being fired.

- As a recent college graduate, my son took a job delivering pizza for a national chain here in Portland. At training, the franchise manager said “There’s no such thing as a sick day here. I work sick all the time. I don’t care if you have a fever, I don’t care if you have diarrhea, you get in here. If you have to throw up, you roll down the window and puke, and then you deliver that pizza!” It’s important to note that a fair number of his regulars were shut-ins, elderly and handicapped individuals who couldn’t get out to shop or eat elsewhere.

I shudder to think of the impact of that one business. But it’s hardly an anomaly. 79% of food workers don’t get paid sick days, and the CDC attributes 70% of foodborne transmission of norovirus to infected food workers.

The proposed ordinance is needed, reasonable, and socially just. It also makes sense economically, as it can both help reduce emergency room visits, saving significant health care costs, and reduce the likelihood of job separation by 25%, saving employers the expense associated with employee turnover. The experience where similar policies have been adopted, including communities comparable in size to Portland, has been positive.

Finally, the ability to earn paid time off when we are sick is just one more strategy to improve the well-being of those living on the edge. Like the minimum wage, it puts a few more dollars in the pockets of struggling workers, who spend their pay locally on food, rent, transportation and other necessities. That money circulates in the local economy.

In essence, the ordinance before you is a measure of what kind of community we want to be. Portland has earned a national reputation as a foodie town. But will it be a healthy place to live, work, and eat? Will ours be a community where everyone can thrive, no matter where they work, or what their family looks like? If we decry domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking, are we prepared to enact policies that allow victims to take the time they need to address it?

The Maine Women’s Lobby urges you to pass the ordinance as drafted. We look forward to working with you over the coming months, and I would be happy to answer questions.