

## Family leave becomes workplace benefits ‘new frontier’

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



San Francisco recently enacted the most comprehensive parental leave law in the nation. New parents working for San Francisco companies are eligible to receive six weeks of fully paid leave.

The benefit applies to mothers and fathers who have had a baby together by birth, adoption or by becoming foster parents. It also extends to same-sex couples. California law now provides workers with 55 percent of their wages for up to six weeks.

If two bills just introduced by Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara, are passed this session and signed into law, they will expand California’s family leave law. The bills are similar to ones Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed in 2015 after deciding they would unwisely widen the gap between California’s law and the Federal Medical Leave Act, which requires companies employing 50 or more workers to provide 12 weeks of unpaid family leave.

The bills Jackson now proposes would require companies with 20 or more workers to provide 12 weeks of unpaid, protected leave; make it illegal for companies to deny medical benefits to workers taking the leave; and expand the definition of “family” eligible for family medical leave to include a grandparent, grandchild, sibling, domestic partner and parent-in-law or adult child.

With President Donald Trump and his daughter, Ivanka, now advocating for greater family leave benefits, federal law also may expand in the future.

No doubt, family leave is the new “frontier” in workplace benefits. It reflects the multi-generational challenge of balancing careers with family responsibilities. Its primary beneficiaries are no longer new parents, or those caring for sick or disabled children. Increasingly they include workers caring for elderly parents and extended family members.

Caring for an elderly parent, whether or not he or she lives independently, lives with an adult child, or lives in a care facility, often takes workers on wild rides through their careers and workplaces.

Companies are recognizing the challenges and opportunities. They are using programs to accommodate maternity, paternity and eldercare leaves as workplace benefits to recruit and retain their most valued and skilled employees.

Two out of five adults in America are caregivers for loved ones, including aging parents. About 60 percent of these caregivers are women, working full- or part-time jobs. An estimated one-third of boomer women are caring for their parents.

According to a study released by Boston College's Center for Retirement Research, increasingly women over 50 are leaving their jobs in order to provide this care. And the need is expected to grow, with the senior population predicted to double by 2030.

According to the Boston College study, the average annual income lost by caregivers is 33 percent; about 11 percent of caregivers end up quitting their jobs to care for someone at home; the lifelong hit from lost wages, pensions and social security is more than \$300,000; and when responsibilities end, caregivers struggle to reenter the workplace.

A MetLife study estimates that U.S. businesses realize a \$17.1 billion annual loss in productivity as a result of full-time employees struggling to care for their family members.

The giant professional services firm Deloitte has responded to this need by offering employees up to 16 weeks of paid leave a year for caregivers. New mothers can take up to eight weeks of paid short-term disability leave on top of the family leave benefit.

Expanding benefits beyond young parents helps recruit and retain skilled workers. It also "normalizes" taking time off to care for family. It becomes an accepted benefit that is used by men and woman across generations.

As the massive boomer generation advances and more millennials begin caring for their aging parents, companies likely will voluntarily recognize the advantages of providing expanded family leave.

But before local, state and federal agencies mandate further expansions, they must work with employers to ensure requirements are both reasonable and effective.

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