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The spreading virus calls for fast action on paid sick days for health and personal care workers

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No one likes to watch someone beating a dead horse. So, I'll try to be brief.

Just over a year ago, I wrote a [Health Affairs Blog](#) calling on Congress to pass legislation requiring that all workers have paid sick days. Had this been accomplished, the United States would be in a much better position to handle what may turn out to be a pandemic. A health and long-term care system that provides a strong incentive for many low-paid people to go to work sick is now multiplying the pathways for coronavirus transmission. Political inaction will likely exacerbate an expected shortage of health care workers. And, given what is known about the novel disease, it's fair to say that it will likely [raise the death toll](#), particularly among the frail and elderly people.

[Research](#) shows that the rate of flu infection is lower in places requiring paid sick days than in places that do not. In an [op-ed](#) today, Dr. Robert Besser, president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, emphasizes the need for paid sick days in pointing out that public health officials cannot work effectively if political leaders fail to improve health equity in the workforce. "The CDC is an evidence-based public health agency, but if the evidence used to make recommendations does not incorporate these health equity issues, we will fall short. The nation will not be prepared to weather what is becoming a pandemic. If systems and tactics that can help to control the spread of covid-19 — such as paid sick days, shown to reduce the spread of flu in jurisdictions where they are mandated — are not available to every American, CDC recommendations are, effectively, words that cannot be implemented."

While progress is needed on many equity issues, including universal coverage, Dr. Bessler suggests several ways to help stem the current crisis. These include setting up a fund to compensate hourly workers without paid leave for their loss

of income when sick; providing legal aid for those who are fired for not coming to work when ill; funding outreach to non-English speakers; asking insurers to waive co-pays for testing and treatment; supplementing funding for community health centers that care for a large proportion of those without insurance; and ensuring free meals are available for children when schools are closed.

These ideas are good start. But the spreading virus challenges Congress and the White House to do more. Legislation could be passed requiring: 1) paid sick days for all persons working in health care, home care, nursing home, and residential care settings; 2) Medicaid rates to be sufficient to fund paid sick days, and 3) providing emergency funds for employers that would suffer financial stress for meeting the requirement. This would protect public health while mitigating financial distress for some providers operating on thin margins.

The number of American workers with paid sick leave has risen over the past few years, driven in part by [legislation](#) enacted by [10 states](#) and the District of Columbia requiring employers to provide it. Despite this progress, [34.2 million private-sector workers](#) still cannot earn a single paid sick day to recover from the flu, care for a sick child, or seek preventive care. Among establishments providing vulnerable people with health care and social assistance, 15 percent lack this benefit. This may be a low estimate.

Last January's Health Affairs blog identified political obstacles to getting a paid sick leave requirement into law. Progressives have packaged paid sick days - which would benefit primarily low-wage workers – as part of an ambitious legislative push for much more expensive paid family leave. Thus, a relatively low-cost benefit for health care workers on the front lines is being held hostage to a much more expensive middle- and upper-middle class objective. Obstacles on the political right are obvious. Leery of offending business interests, conservatives historically avoid legislation raising the cost of labor. Paid sick days are no exception.

It would be civic-minded for lobbies representing nursing homes, home health providers, hospitals, and physicians to support legislation requiring paid sick days for lower-paid workers. But don't hold your breath – not even in the midst of a pandemic. To avoid offending the minority of their members that don't offer paid sick days, they will likely skirt the issue while doing their best in other ways to

fight the spread of the virus. I hope that I'm proven very wrong in this assumption. It's time to stop beating a dead horse.